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SPECIAL REPORT

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DEAD SPACE

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ISSUE 363



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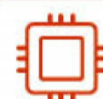
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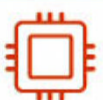
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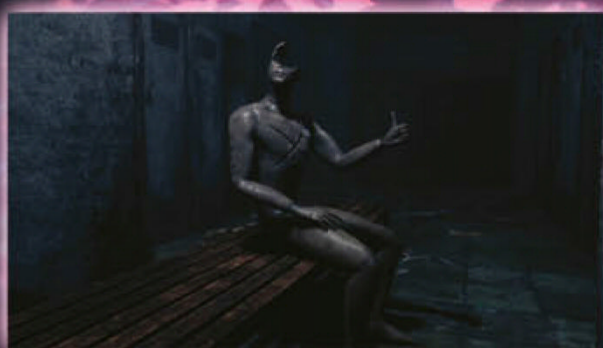
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“THE MONGOL EMPIRE KICKED EVEN MORE ASS THAN I REALISED”



One of the things I love about historical games is how much you can learn. *Assassin's Creed* showed me a new side of the ancient world; *Crusader Kings* taught me more about succession laws than I ever thought I'd need to know; and now, thanks to *Age of Empires IV*, I know that the Mongol Empire kicked even more ass than I realised.

ROBIN VALENTINE

Twitter

@robinlvalentine

This month

Conquered a new desk in the office (by stacking a bunch of D&D books on top of it).

What's so exciting about the game is how it's exploring what made historical cultures unique – and using that as the basis for fascinating RTS innovation. Check out our feature, and maybe you'll even learn something yourself.

ROBIN VALENTINE

PRINT EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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latest offer!**SEE p46**

The PC Gamer team

**MOLLIE TAYLOR**

Twitter

@mollietay

This month

Taught us all about competitive farming. I think it's about throwing turnips at each other?

**TYLER WILDE**

Twitter

@tyler_wilde

This month

Learned so much about *Sifu's* martial arts that he had to register his hands as deadly weapons.

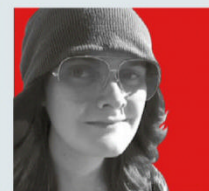
**CHRISTOPHER LIVINGSTON**

Twitter

@screencuisine

This month

Became the mayor of a town full of the galaxy's least grateful aliens.

**NAT CLAYTON**

Twitter

@its_natclayton

This month

Took some screenshots of *Mirror's Edge* so good they made us question our perception of time.

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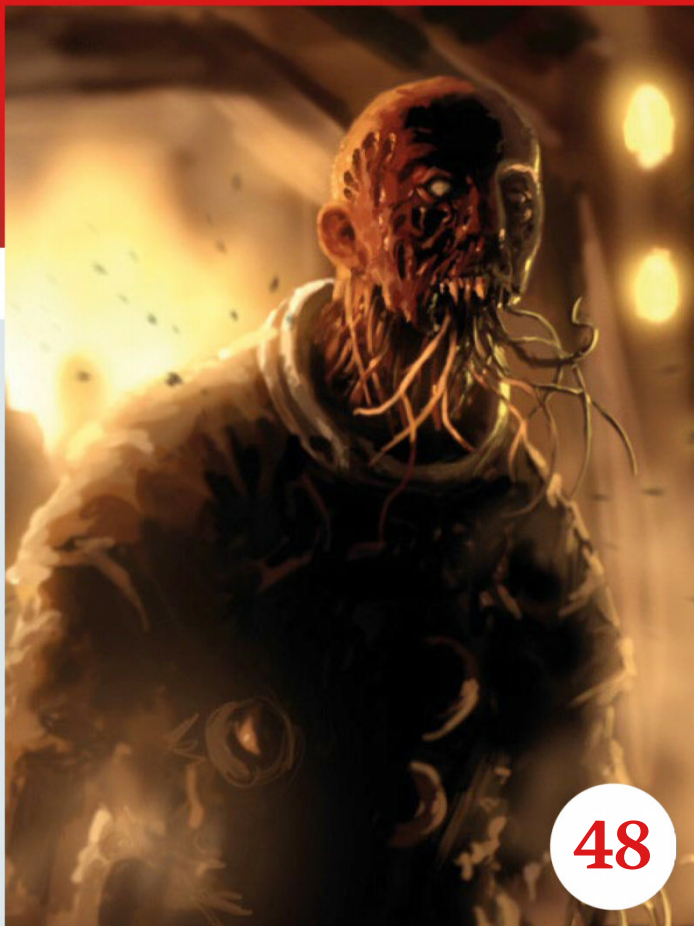
Martial arts brawler *Sifu* promises a fluid, impactful and highly customisable combat system – with plenty of nods to classic cinema. We investigate.

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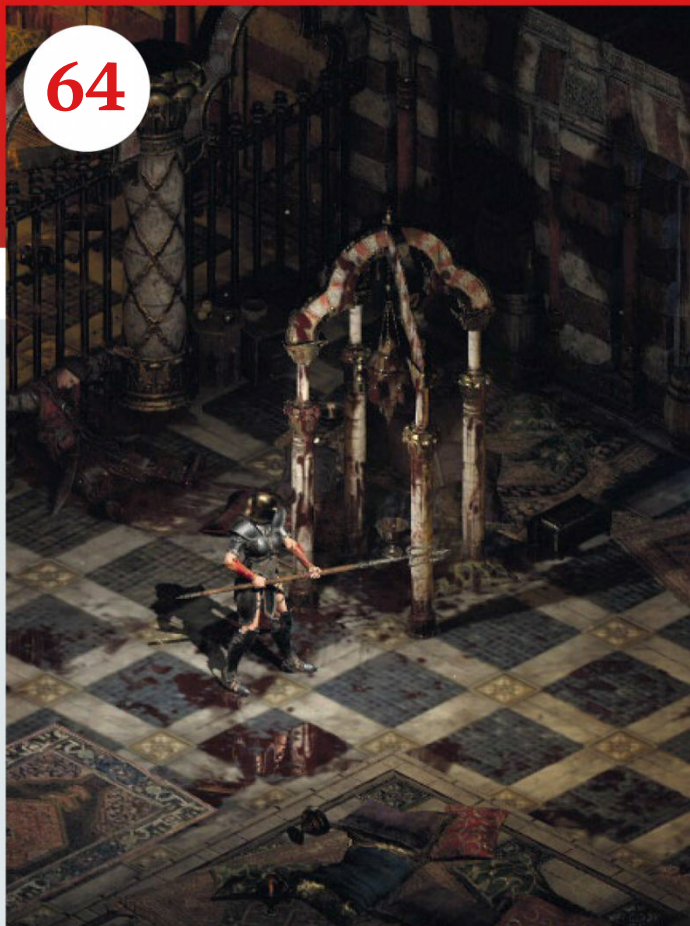
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MONITOR

NEWS

McCracken remembers this era fondly because, "Nearly everyone who was serious about computer games tried writing their own, regardless of the results."

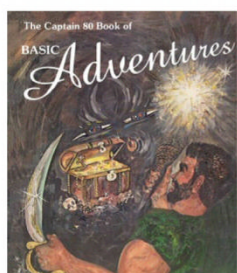


THE 40-YEAR TYPO

A developer returned to his game, spotted a misprint, and brought **ARCTIC ADVENTURE** back to life

Harry McCracken is not the name of a Cold War superspy, but a man who was once a developer for Radio Shack's TRS-80 microcomputer. McCracken recently went back to have a look at his first game, *Arctic Adventure*, which he wrote when he was 16 around 1980-81 – a text adventure inspired by the work of Scott Adams, a pioneering designer of the *Adventure* series.

As was common, *Arctic Adventure* was distributed in The Captain 80 Book of BASIC Adventures: pages of



The book basically made-up a biography for McCracken, "[it said] I was fifteen years old (I was seventeen), took computer courses at school (nope), played Dungeons & Dragons (never), and was devoted to science fiction (not particularly)."

type-it-yourself BASIC code, each entry its own adventure game.

Despite the emulators and swathes of TRS-80 software available online, however, McCracken couldn't find *Arctic Adventure*. "I know of only a couple of contemporary mentions of it on the internet, and no evidence that anyone has played it since the

**"THE GAME
WASN'T JUST
UNWINNABLE, BUT
UNPLAYABLE"**

first Reagan administration," McCracken writes. "It seems fair to call it a lost game. Or at least I lost it myself until recently."

MCCRACKEN ON

McCracken was paid but never got a copy of the book: he'd go on to make two other games, before realising he enjoyed writing more and taking his career in that direction (he's now the tech editor of Fast Company).

"Decades later, I didn't spend much time thinking about *Arctic Adventure*, but I never forgot the fact that I hadn't received a copy of the Captain 80 book. Thanks to the internet, I eventually acquired one."

FRESH COAT

NEW WOW PORTRAITS



Blizzard has quietly replaced a number of risqué in-game paintings across *World of Warcraft* with less raunchy alternatives. A minor step in itself, the change comes in the wake of more sweeping changes made to the MMO in the wake of this summer's harassment allegations. ■ **NC**

GETTING STEAMY

GAMES ON-THE-GO



Valve has work to do in order to get every game working on the Steam Deck, and who can say whether it'll manage that by launch. It aims to, at least, and those behind its clever compatibility layer say they see incompatible games "as a bug" they'll aim to swiftly fix. ■ **JR**



PRESS PAUSE

SOME REAL DISCORD



A big part of Discord culture died as two beloved Discord music bots had their final encore, with Google beginning to clamp down on programs that circumvent YouTube's frontend and advertisement. Groovy departed on August 30, while Rhythm sang its final goodbyes on September 15. ■ **MT**

Arctic Adventure

By Harry McCracken

I will describe your surroundings at the top of the screen. Tell me what you want to do with mostly two-word commands such as "GO WEST", "GET BRICK", "INVENTORY", "HELP", and "MELT ICE".

Use "SAVE" and "LOAD" to store and recover a game in progress. Use "QUIT" to end your game or start over.

Remember to EXAMINE things, and to think logically. Good luck on your adventure!

Press ENTER to continue.

ABOVE: McCracken added an even earlier game of his as an Easter egg, "A rudimentary slot-machine simulator that survived because I uploaded it to a BBS circa 1979. (Now it's a slot machine inside a tiny casino in the Arctic.)"

"That was when I made an alarming discovery: as printed in the Captain 80 book, the game wasn't just unwinnable, but unplayable. It turned out that it had a 1981 typo that consisted of a single missing 'O' in a character string. It was so fundamental a glitch that it rendered the game's command of the English language inoperable. You couldn't GET SHOVEL let alone complete the adventure."

McCracken has no idea "whether I was responsible for the bug or it slipped in during the editing process, I don't know. But if you typed *Arctic Adventure* into your TRS-80 back then and couldn't get it to work, I hereby apologise."

Arctic Adventure is now restored online, with the typo fixed and running on a web-based TRS-80 emulator.

The return of *Arctic Adventure* is a fun tale, but the fact it sat around with a typo rendering it unplayable for 40 years is amazing: lord knows how satisfying McCracken must have found it to re-insert that missing 'O'.

"I decided that it was my game and there was nothing wrong with continuing development on it after a four-decade break – especially since it's unclear whether anyone managed to get it running in 1981," writes McCracken. At least, "I do know that it's now possible to play it all the way through to its exhilarating conclusion."

Rich Stanton

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Cookie monster

Cookie Clicker has come to Steam, and immediately topped the charts.

Furry friend

A hamster picking buying and selling crypto at random has made a 20% return on his investments.

Runescape reversal

Runescape developer Jagex tried to shut down the *Runelite HD* mod. After a fan outcry it later announced it would help out the creator instead.

The settlers

Activision has settled for \$18 million over allegations of workplace discrimination.

Opaque Windows

With bizarre error messages and a muddled response from Microsoft, Windows 11 launch has been a mess.

Crikey

New Zealander Charles Upham is 'reimagined' as Australian Lucas Riggs by *Call of Duty: Vanguard*. Kiwis aren't happy.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy has a long and varied CV. It contains most big companies you could name, usually for a period of just a few days, and always preceding the theft of an armful of secure documents. As for references, The Spy doesn't hold much hope. And yet, what choice does The Spy have but to go looking for work when, these days, most corporations are far better at leaking their own secrets than any external agent could hope to be?

Developer and reverse engineering fan Ighor July, for instance, figured out how to get Nvidia's GeForce Now server to give him a confidential list of thousands of games. It includes everything from console exclusives like God of War, to names of games that – to our knowledge – don't exist, like *XCOM 3* and *Cities Skylines 2*.

There are two big questions to answer here. 1) Is this real? 2) Are these games actually coming to PC? The first is easy: yes, Nvidia itself confirmed it. But the statement released by the company also suggests that the second question isn't so simple.

"NVIDIA is aware of an unauthorised published game list, with both released and/or speculative titles, used only for internal tracking and testing," Nvidia told press. "Inclusion on the list is neither confirmation nor an announcement of any game. NVIDIA took immediate

action to remove access to the list. No confidential game builds or personal information were exposed."

And so Nvidia's official stance is that it filled the list with fake game names for testing purposes. But that isn't all that's happening here, as, since the leak's publication, some of its listings have been confirmed as real. *Outcast 2* was announced the week following the leak, SquareEnix remake *Actraiser Renaissance* was announced and released on September 24, and Gearbox confirmed that a new *Brothers in Arms* was in development.

HOLLAND DAYS SOURCE

There's seemingly a third category too: titles publishers themselves have listed as placeholders. *Project Holland*, for instance, is – according to Windows Central – the codename for *Fable*, currently in development by Playground Games. But even here, there are traps. *Titanfall 3* is listed in the leak, but don't get too excited: in another field that listing is titled "apex_legends_-_titanfall", suggesting this is an old listing from before *Apex Legends* released without the *Titanfall* branding.

Basically, if you're adding projects to a secret backend that no-one will ever look at, there's little incentive to go back and tidy up your work. These services are strewn with the detritus of old, cancelled, or rebranded games, which makes deciphering what's real from what's an idea someone had five years ago an exercise in futility. *Scalebound* is part of the leak, and that was cancelled four years ago. There are likely some top secret reveals hidden here, but good luck separating them out from the chaff.

As an extra wrinkle, Ubisoft sparked further speculation by issuing a takedown request to SteamDB operator Pavel Djundik, who published a copy of the list on Github. Djundik removed the list, which led to multiple other copies being posted elsewhere. This shifted

the attention to Ubisoft's titles, which contained multiple codenames including *Project Meteor*, which is thought to be a new *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* DLC. Two titles – *Project Q* and *Project Over* – are still unknown. Which means The Spy won't be looking for new work yet. Spy out. ■
The Spy

NVIDIA'S OFFICIAL STANCE IS THAT IT FILLED THE LIST WITH FAKE GAME NAMES



THE SPY
The Spy is still waiting for an *Alpha Protocol* sequel.

This month in... 2011



1 "We size up the MMOFPS that makes *Battlefield* look like a playground scuffle," promises Martin Davies' cover feature for *PlanetSide 2*. It was an exciting time for online gaming, with technology reaching a point where high-fidelity massively multiplayer experiences were in reach. *PlanetSide 2* wasn't quite as robust as the biggest names in the FPS scene, but it had undeniable promise.

ISSUE
233, December 2011
ON THE COVER
PlanetSide 2
IN THE CINEMAS
Johnny English Reborn

2 *Rage* (84%) impresses with its "satisfying fun". *Call of Juarez: The Cartel* (35%) is another story. "Pathetic guns, horrible characters and stupid enemies," we say.



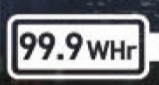
3 Matt Lees takes us back to 2002, and a time when – and there's no easy way to cushion this – he started a coal empire in *Runescape*, exploiting the labour of digital child miners in order to make an easy profit. "More than 20 children were contacting me on a daily basis to sell me coal. I was a coal baron."



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animation?
RORSS @EllieSenra How you do that?
leSenra @lilytoowoo oh wow, I'm
intrigued
yNPrey cheating lol



The Stardew Valley Cup

Hosted by ConcernedApe & UnsurpassableZ

HOE TO HOE

How **STARDEW VALLEY** went from cosy to competitive

One of the most wonderful things about the evolution of esports is that these days, any game can be a contest. Long gone are the days where ultra-competitive ventures like *Dota 2* or *Counter-Strike* are the only ways to enjoy high-level gaming. This was evident when at the beginning of August, *Stardew Valley* creator Eric Barone announced the first-ever *Stardew Valley Cup* – a tournament that would pit four teams against each other for a \$40,000 prize pot, donated by Barone himself.

The objective was to take on 100 challenges within three hours and to try to complete as many as possible, with each challenge offering a different number of points depending on its difficulty. Small things like naming a chicken after Barone would net a team ten points, while more difficult tasks like getting to the 100th floor in the game's gruelling Skull Caverns granted 25 points. The challenges, as well as the Cup itself, were created by popular *Stardew Valley* content creator Zach Hartman.

"I really wanted to make sure the challenges were high quality, since I knew they would

have a huge influence on how well the competition would turn out," Hartman said. "I wanted them to force the competitors to play in a way they never had before, while still rewarding the skills necessary to be a good speedrunner." Hartman also co-hosted the event with Barone, having previously streamed together earlier this year.

"Eric and I connected for the first time in May after I reached out to him by email," he said. "He agreed to be on my stream in June, and during that stream, as well as the Cup, everyone was super excited to get to see him. He has always made every decision

based on what will bring the most joy to his community, and the relationship he has developed with the *Stardew Valley* fan base is evident."

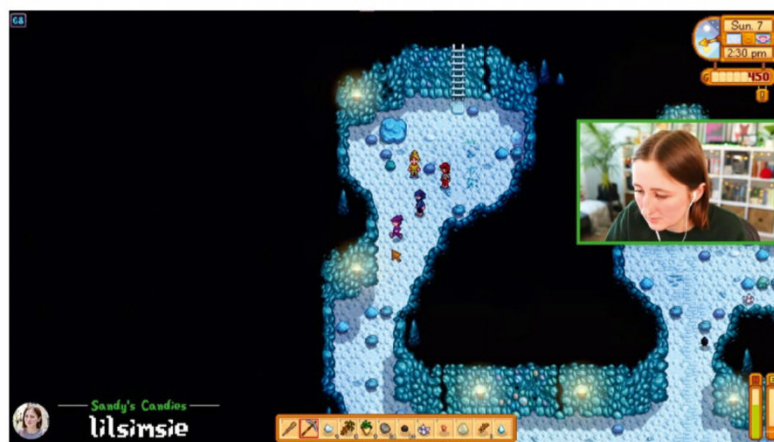
The Cup had 16 competitors in total – four for each team – being a spread of some of *Stardew Valley*'s most dedicated content creators. Some streamers like TheHaboo and cordite89 were already well-versed in the intricacies of *Stardew Valley* speedrunning, while others like Fuzzireno had never delved into the game's more competitive side.

"It's been both a fun and exciting experience but also nerve-wracking at the same time," she



Barone's beach

All teams played on a beach farm, and in a nice nod also used the same seed as the one for Eric Barone's recent co-op farm, which he completed in just over 12 months with some friends as a way to "stay in touch during a strange year". Here it is if you fancy using it yourself: 243749714. Happy farming!



MAIN: Barone announced he's working on a new game – similar to *Stardew*, but not farming.

LEFT: Speedy dungeon crawling was a potential source of extra points.

ALTERNATIVE AGRICULTURE *The Cup featured several strange secret challenges*



CRAFT A MINI JUKEBOX
Take your music anywhere, but first befriend a tiny barman and harvest some lightning bolts to do it.



FIND THE SECRET FURNITURE
Placing objects in their corresponding locations around Pelican Town rewards some strange cursed statues.



WEAR A DINOSAUR OUTFIT
If you've got the dino eggs on hand, you can fashion a nifty prehistoric costume from them.



GET A NEW LOOK
Befriend the wizard and he'll allow you to change your appearance whenever you please. What sort of w... oh, wait.

told Hartman and Barone before the event. “As a casual person, I’d be like ‘but this day, I could be doing something with it,’ or ‘animation cancelling, how is that gonna save time?’”

The roster also saw the likes of SeanieDew, who has gone viral on TikTok a few times for his cosplay of Harvey, one of the game’s marriage candidates. Animated comedy sketch artist Matthew McCleskey was another competitor, having never streamed on Twitch prior to the Stardew Valley Cup.

“It was such a huge learning experience since I had only ever played *Stardew* casually before the Cup. My teammates taught me a lot about strategy, animation cancelling, and speedrunning techniques,” McCleskey said. “Overall it was a super high-stress time, but it was some of the most fun I’ve had.” Each team had around two weeks to practice, prepare and strategise prior to the tournament. “I ended up asking them how many hours they’ve all done in preparation for the event,” Hartman told Barone on-stream. “The total was over 700 hours of practice in the last two weeks for this event.”

STOP START

The dedication and hours of practice are apparent once the tournament kicks off. The techniques that McCleskey mentioned are present amongst nearly every competitor. It’s strange seeing just how many ways you can streamline a game that, traditionally, feels more planted in relaxing and peaceful vibes. Seeing the animation cancelling in action is mighty impressive – it’s become a common speedrunning tactic, one that arose from Barone’s own forgetfulness. “When I made *Stardew Valley*, I added in this little combination of keys that causes whatever

animation your character is doing to stop immediately,” he explained. “I just put it in for debug reasons... and then I forgot to take it out.”

Other interesting, non-speedrunning strategies also get utilised throughout by each team. Some are making use of dedicated fishers for perks like money and completing some of the angling challenges. Team Sandy’s Candies opt to colour code their characters so they’re more easily identifiable, assigning each member a role.

The method seems to work for Sandy’s Candies, who pull through with a surprise last-minute points banking. They come away with 611 points, followed by Pierree’s Cherries at 597 points. Pam’s Yams come in third, with Krobus’ Crocuses taking fourth place.

The thing that’s been apparent throughout all of this is just how much fun everybody is having, from the competitors to Barone himself. When Sandy’s Candies are declared the winner, every member erupts into cheers. It’s clear how much both the game’s community and creator sincerely care about what *Stardew Valley* has grown into.

“It’s really cool to be able to do something like this and that there’s so many people would be interested in this little, scrappy, indie farming game that I made,” Barone concluded towards the end of the stream. His active involvement with the community never goes unnoticed, and Hartman feels is a big reason something like this could even be possible. “The *Stardew Valley* Cup could not have happened without the continued support and grace of Eric, the competitors, and the community,” he said. “I am incredibly grateful that I was able to be a part of *Stardew Valley*’s history, and I am very excited to see what the future holds!” ■

Mollie Taylor

**“MY TEAMMATES
TAUGHT ME A LOT
ABOUT STRATEGY
AND SPEEDRUNNING”**

Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

ICE COLD

How **11 BIT STUDIOS** became the kings of 'dead serious' games

For many game developers, becoming a quest designer on the *Witcher* series would be a dream come true. For Pawel Miechowski, however, it was a sign he was in the wrong place. The Polish writer had been working on a smaller project, which was cancelled as CD Projekt piled as many bodies as it could onto the franchise that would make its name.

"I'm a big fan of *The Witcher*, but being a quest designer is totally not my thing," he says. "I felt kind of lost. I decided to quit." A bunch of Miechowski's friends found themselves in a similar boat, and quickly founded 11 Bit Studios. "Bits are always even, 2-bit, 4-bit, 8-bit," Miechowski points out. "Beginning with the name, we wanted to make unconventional connections."

That approach was borne out in the studio's first few games, built from an apartment in Warsaw. The *Anomaly* series technically belonged to the tower offence genre, since it gave you control of the attackers, not the defenders. And on mobile, 11 Bit released *Sleepwalker's Journey*, a platformer where you played the platform, as well as *Funky Smugglers* – a variant on Fruit Ninja in which you were swiping contraband from '70s-styled passengers as they passed through an airport x-ray machine. But the studio made its most strikingly unconventional connection in 2014 – when it paired *The Sims* with a humanitarian crisis in *This War of Mine*.

11 Bit's founders, by this point nearing 40 and playing *The Last of Us*, were ready to treat gamers as a mature audience. "We as players required that from games," Miechowski says. "That was really a breakthrough moment, like combustion."

Miechowski's brother Grzegorz, then CEO of the company, pulled inspiration from the articles he'd been

reading about the Bosnian War, and specifically the siege of Sarajevo. "Let's make a game about civilians trying to survive war," he said, "with all the harsh consequences of those decisions. A dead serious game."

GET SERIOUS

At GDC, Miechowski spoke to Lucas Pope, the maker of the similarly heavy *Papers, Please*. And as development of *This War of Mine* continued, the Russo-Ukrainian War unfolded on 11 Bit's doorstep, providing a sobering reminder of just how quickly order could break down. "If you think that the civilised world would never collapse, well: it's our neighbouring country, a few hundred kilometres from where I live," Miechowski says.

Among the survivors of *This War of Mine* were an ageing teacher, now simply a burden, and a professional footballer, whose fame counted for naught once conflict took over. "We did it on purpose," Miechowski says. "Most of our skills would be useless in war. What counts is survival skills, cooking, fighting, but also one man helping another. You learn from your grandfathers who lived during the Second World War. They have real experiences, we can listen to them and learn."

This War of Mine was a huge success. One fan, the award-winning Polish author Lukasz Orbitowski, wrote a novel off the back of it – which in turn inspired a story-driven DLC pack called *Father's Promise*. The experiment led to another collaboration, with *80 Days* lead writer Meg Jayanth, on the *Last Broadcast* DLC – in which a disabled radio DJ decides whether or not to spare listeners the truth about news in their city, in order to prevent widespread panic. "What we were trying to achieve was to show very different perspectives," Miechowski says.

Around the same time, marketing director (and now game director) Patryk Grzeszczuk pushed 11 Bit to codify its new philosophy. Today, the studio calls its work 'meaningful entertainment', a mantra that has led directly to *Frostpunk* and its upcoming sequel. Like *This War of Mine*, they're management games about surviving a hostile environment by huddling together and making hard choices. In fact, in *Frostpunk*, even the buildings seem to huddle – clustering around a central furnace that represents warmth and hope, even as it burns to embers.

"Everything comes from the idea," Miechowski says. "In *Frostpunk 2*, we want to focus on the conflict between humans and human nature, between the cold and human values. From there comes the story and all the gameplay systems – they need to be like cogs in a good machine." ■

Jeremy Peel

SNOW MANIAC

A *Frostpunk* ruler's descent into tyranny

COLD

Decreeing that all food should now be in the form of soup
The meat goes further if you turn it into mush.

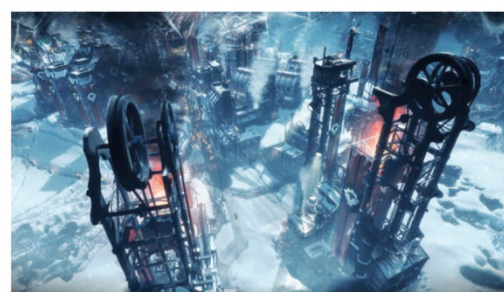
Forcing citizens to work through the night
It's not as if it ever gets very light in the day anyway.

Giving children full-time jobs
Hey, they're an untapped workforce!

Legalising cannibalism to stave off starvation
Hey, at least it's not more soup, right? You should be happy.

HOT

"LET'S MAKE A GAME ABOUT CIVILIANS TRYING TO SURVIVE WAR"



ABOVE: Though often spoken of as 'indie', 11 Bit Studios is now home to 185 developers.

LEFT: The knowledge that this too shall pass pushes you through *This War of Mine's* horror.

DNA Tracing

■ GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLAINED

IT'S EASY TO LOOK BACK ON
MID-'90S INTERPLAY AS A
HAVEN FOR RPG
DEVELOPMENT, BUT THAT'S
FAR FROM THE TRUTH

ISLAND REVENUE

Seeking a return on Interplay's investments, **BLACK ISLE** became legend

The Black Isle isn't even an island, in reality. It's a peninsula in the Scottish Highlands, home to B&Bs and commuters working in nearby Inverness. Visitors frequent cottage museums and peer out across the damp beach, looking for bottlenose dolphins.

In the imaginations of Interplay's internal development team, however, Black Isle became a blasted rock in the middle of the ocean, illuminated by fierce lightning strikes – more akin to *The Witcher's* Aretuza than the real-life place accessible by the A9 trunk road.

Yet that's the spirit with which Black Isle Studios was founded – an enthusiasm for extrapolating mystery and adventure from a mundane world. It first did so with *Fallout* in 1997. Developed by '80s kids who had grown up under the perpetual threat of nuclear holocaust, it organically became a Californian vision of the post-apocalypse – not so much The Golden State as a land baked until it cracked and bubbled. The stroke of genius, though, was to juxtapose that wasteland with imagery ripped straight from utopia – the perfect, picket-fence existence portrayed by '50s American advertising. The finished game dripped with irony right from character creation, where a Monopoly Man-esque mascot grinned winningly as he blew enemies into chunks.

It's easy to look back on mid-'90s Interplay as a haven for RPG development, but that's far from the truth. RPGs were out of fashion, and like almost any major publisher you could name today, Interplay was preoccupied by sports. But that worked out in Black Isle's favour: the executives were too distracted to question the designers of the low-budget RPG in the corner. By the time they paid close attention to *Fallout*, it was a surprise critical hit.

INFINITY AND BEYOND

Sensing that they wouldn't get away with working quite the same way again, *Fallout's* central creative trio – Tim Cain, Jason Anderson, and Leonard Boyarsky – left to found Troika Games. These were not sequel people (though two of them, Cain and Boyarsky, would

eventually rejoin Black Isle staff to work on *The Outer Worlds*, which came out in 2019, at Obsidian).

While *Fallout 2* did get made, a deal made during the original game's development ensured that Black Isle's focus would shift elsewhere. Interplay had acquired the licence for D&D, at great expense – and after Black Isle boss Feargus Urquhart suggested Bioware make use of it, his team inherited the Infinity Engine built for *Baldur's Gate*. It would have been very easy for Black Isle to become Bioware's b-team – indeed, the two studios were confused throughout the late '90s by fans. But instead, the studio pushed the Infinity Engine to new extremes.

With *Planescape: Torment*, that meant forefronting the dialogue box. Where Bioware had used it only to relate conversation, Black Isle filled the space with prose that detailed the demeanour and dress of your acquaintances, fleshing out the basic sprites and giving the game a novelistic air you can still see in the likes of *Disco Elysium*.

BELOW: Sshh, she's sleeping. Sleeping forever.

BOTTOM: Cor, look at all those words. That's *Planescape: Torment* for you.

Moreover, *Torment's* developer built on *Fallout's* commitment to holding players accountable for their choices. It's funny to think that Black Isle's D&D debut constituted an existential crisis for the tabletop system, as the team picked apart its rules on moral alignment.



FOUNDER'S PACK

Why Black Isle was first established, as related to Gamespy



1

"To focus purely on making Forgotten Realms and Planescape AD&D branded titles."

2

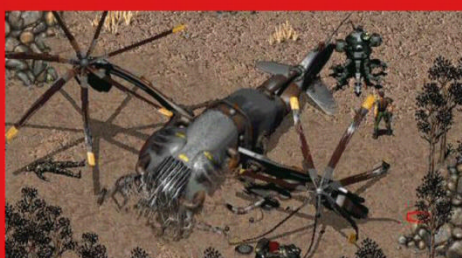
"To continue the legacy of the RPGs that gave Interplay its name in the mid to late '80s."

3

That's it, so I've got extra space for background: '80s Interplay made *Wasteland* and *Bard's Tale*.

OCEAN VIEW

The life (and afterlife) of an RPG great



FALLOUT
The original '50s future post-apocalypse.



FALLOUT 2
A tad too wacky, but a solid sequel.



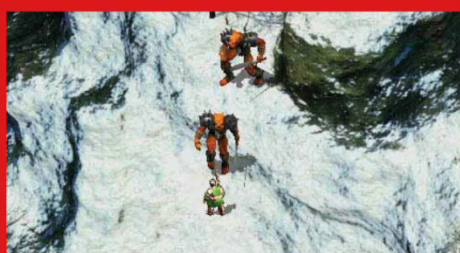
VAN BUREN
The original and canned *Fallout 3*.



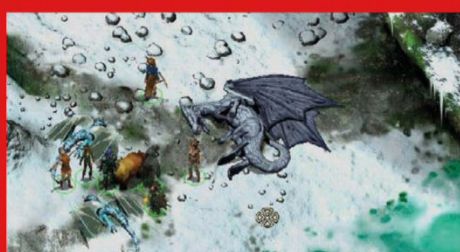
FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS
Recycled factions and characters planned for Van Buren.



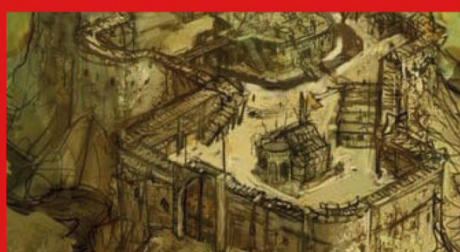
BALDUR'S GATE
Birthed the Infinity Engine, and the modern RPG.



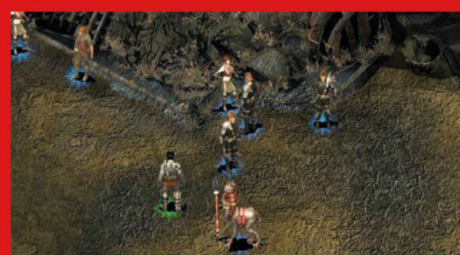
ICEWIND DALE
A puzzle box of D&D combat.



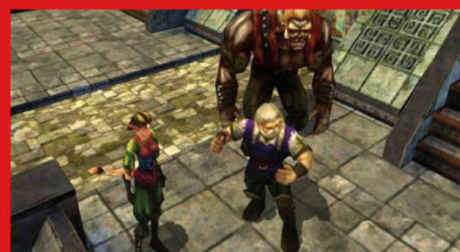
ICEWIND DALE II
Great canvas for high concept adventuring parties.



BALDUR'S GATE III: THE BLACK HOUND
Referenced in *Pillars of Eternity*.



PLANESCAPE: TORMENT
More interactive book than RPG.



TORN
Unreleased. A new setting, starring a cursed wanderer.



KEY

- Black Isle Studios
- Bioware
- Obsidian

DALE, WINTER

Yet it was the same studio that captured classic D&D's breezy, freeing sense of adventure so completely in *Icewind Dale*. Now paring back the dialogue and leaning into combat, Black Isle exploited the Infinity Engine's potential for intricately designed battles. It created the thinking person's *Diablo*: a linear series of elaborate murder puzzles that took you deeper and deeper beneath the mountains made famous by Drizzt Do'Urden.

Since *Icewind Dale* gave you both a quicksave key and a pause button, it had no qualms about disassembling your grizzled party of killers in seconds. Some encounters forced you to step back, reconsider your strategy, and scour your spellbooks for counters. Your reward for getting it right was the sight of whole skeletal armies crumbling to pieces, as if somebody had pulled the bottom skull from a catacomb Jenga tower.

What little writing space Black Isle did allow itself over the course of the series was typically top-notch, rooting you deeply in the Dale – like the enormous oak tree that swaddles the hamlet of Kuldahar. Click on the kitchens of *Icewind Dale II*'s first pub and you'll be told that the “big, wheezing iron stove reminds you of the barkeep”. Rarely have RPGs told their stories with such clarity.

TORN APART

It wasn't all perfect – in an early pre-echo of *Mass Effect 3*'s ending controversy, Black Isle put out a free *Icewind Dale* update to placate those who found its *Heart of Winter* expansion too abrupt. But the excellence of Black Isle's games is remarkable when you consider that Interplay was wracked by financial trouble throughout its existence. Only in later years did that turbulence start to yield casualties: a new fantasy RPG called *Torn* was



cancelled because “it was not going to be done in time to get Interplay the revenue the company needed to continue operations”, as Urquhart told Gamespot.

Licensing quirks, meanwhile, saw a Forgotten Realms project called *The Black Hound* unexpectedly crowned *Baldur's Gate III* – only for the game to be scrapped after Interplay lost the rights to use the *Baldur's Gate* brand on PC. In the years afterwards, Black Isle games only existed on console, in the form of the *Dark Alliance* series – less the thinking person's *Diablo* than simply *Diablo*, again.

Fittingly for a division that had dealt in liches and ghouls, Black Isle persisted after death, far exceeding its natural lifespan. It still technically exists today, though whether you

recognise its legitimacy as the same studio that made *Fallout* is a matter for personal contemplation. Is Black Isle the person who operates the official Twitter account? Is it the group of people who went on to found Obsidian? Just ask yourself this: when the lightning strikes that dark rock, as it did in the famous splash screen, who does it illuminate? ■

Jeremy Peel

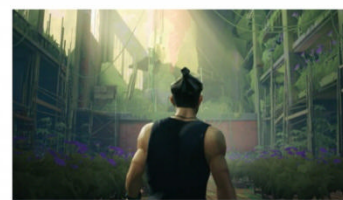
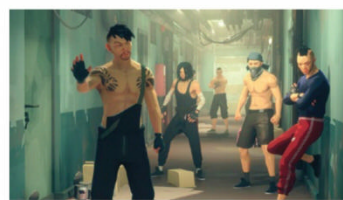
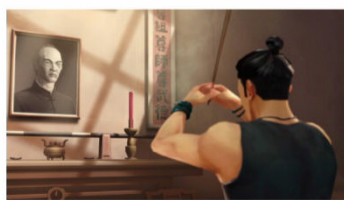
RARELY HAVE RPGS TOLD THEIR STORIES WITH SUCH CLARITY

ABOVE: You can have any building material you like, so long as it's corrugated.

BELOW: Don't see what's so rad about these scorpions, personally.







NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

February 22, 2022

DEVELOPER

Slocap

PUBLISHER

In-house

LINK

sifugame.com

SIFU

How to win fights and intimidate people

Kung fu brawler *Sifu* is about “mastery through practice”, and after watching a gameplay demonstration, I can confirm that beating up an entire apartment building like Iko Uwais is going to take more than button mashing. But make too many mistakes on this singleplayer revenge journey, and you’ll age into dust before gaining satisfaction.

Sifu looks and sounds similar to *Absolver*, developer Slocap’s previous game – those *thwap thwap thwap* hit effects are still super satisfying – but its fighting system isn’t a copy. *Absolver*’s combat involved a cool moveset customisation menu where players could mix-and-match combat styles and build combos that flowed between stances, and *Sifu* doesn’t have an equivalent. All of *Sifu*’s moves are inspired by Pak Mei Kung Fu, which its creative director personally practices.

Sifu does include “over 150 attacks” to work with, though, and a lot of the moves will be unlocked as you play through the campaign. A few of the skills I saw were Pushback Cancel, which introduces a way to negate shoves, Crooked Foot, which adds the option to perform a throw after a successful parry, and Rush Slide Kick, which is what it sounds like. I’ll miss *Absolver*’s drunken-style Stagger combos, which I doubt the real-life Pak Mei school endorses, but it looks like we’ll still have the opportunity to develop a personal fighting style in *Sifu*.

SIFU’S MOVES ARE INSPIRED BY PAK MEI KUNG FU, WHICH ITS CREATIVE DIRECTOR PRACTICES

SIFU DIET

Also like *Absolver*, you won’t have to use your thumb to shine your controller’s d-pad with endless *Street Fighter* quarter-circles; the ‘mastery’ here isn’t mastery of complex input patterns. Mapped to an Xbox controller, two of the ‘base combos’ I saw in the menu went X, X, X, X, X and X, X, Y, as examples. *Sifu* will support mouse and keyboard play with remappable controls, executive producer Pierre Tarno confirmed. (I think I’ll go with a controller myself.)

I imagine there’ll be at least a little sweating over input memorisation, but the demonstration I saw focused on timing, forethought, movement, and crowd control. There are just two attack buttons, light and heavy. The other two controller face buttons are bound to ‘pick up weapon’ and interact/vault. It’s more than vaulting, really: at one point the protagonist scurried up a wall, escaping from a group of fighters.

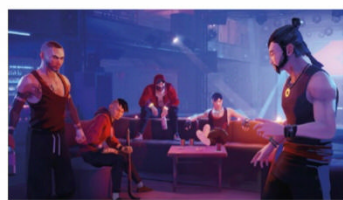
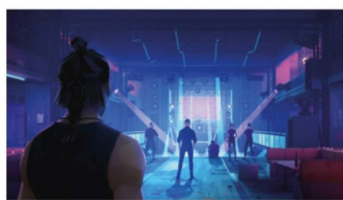
Another way to deal with multiple enemies is to take advantage of each combo’s ‘tactical opportunities’ such as knockdown, pushback and stun effects.

During a combo, you can bounce between opponents without breaking the chain of attacks, moving on from enemies you’ve stunned and then coming back to them when they regain consciousness.

On defence, the right trigger is bound to dodge, while the left trigger parries attacks when timed correctly, or can be held down to block incoming attacks until a meter fills and your guard is broken.

Sifu reminds me most of *Absolver* when an incoming strike is evaded and turns into wind. My hope is that finesse feels even better in *Sifu* where there are no networking or PvP balance concerns to get in the way of whatever feels right. As just an observer right now, I love the way the protagonist leaves ghost trails as he slips and rolls under and around punches and kicks; it’s not one repeated animation.

When you fill an enemy’s guard meter, an on-screen prompt displays which two buttons to press to perform a finishing takedown, which restores a little of your health (and empties theirs). It’s nothing surprising, although the moves look great. *Sifu* did surprise me, however, whenever the protagonist threw an enemy into a wall >>



» or over a railing. I didn't catch much in the way of obvious animation cheating – slippery-slidey footwork, sudden camera changes – to bring level geometry into the fight like that. It generates the kung fu movie choreography feeling Sloclap is going for and makes it look effortless.

During the demonstration, for example, the protagonist finished an opponent by kicking him in the knee and dropping him into a kneel at the foot of a metal bed frame, and then kicking him again in the back, smashing his forehead into the bars – without it going through the bars or otherwise looking ridiculous. Sometimes enemies who witness your badassery will even give up and cower, allowing you to interrogate them.

Sloclap's inspirations come from all kinds of martial arts movies, but the name I've heard most often is Jackie Chan. I'm not sure a videogame has ever really captured the way Chan so efficiently and comically frustrates multiple opponents with props. If *Sifu* can stick the landing on that slapstick, it could truly be great.

DUEL CITIZENSHIP

It'll definitely be hard. Like in *Absolver*, enemies have the same kinds of abilities you do, so your best tricks will be thrown back at you. Hopefully they feel clever enough that we won't end up wishing *Sifu* had a PvP mode like *Absolver*. The player in the demonstration I saw never died, but Tarno says that's just because they're good at the game. Failure is expected.

When you 'die' in *Sifu*, the protagonist is resurrected, but they come back a bit older than they were before. As they age, their health decreases, but their blows start to deal more damage. The idea is that they're becoming an 'old master' whose technique is more precise, but whose body can't take as many blows. Get too old, and it's game over.

That's meant to happen: *Sifu* is the sort of game you're expected to play across multiple runs, and with some effort it'll be possible to unlock abilities permanently, so that they're available at the start of new runs.

Tarno isn't sure where the studio will land on difficulty settings. They're still honing the default level of challenge, he

says, and while modifiers are on the table, he doesn't feel that a mode with a "very low level of challenge" would be in keeping with *Sifu*'s theme: mastery through practice. Failure and repetition are part of how *Sifu* tells its revenge story. It'd be nice to see some 'break glass in emergency' options, though, just in case players get impossibly stuck due to unforeseen combinations of variables.

We've seen some cool-looking scenes so far, particularly in the nightclub, but I'm hoping that Sloclap is saving its best levels for release. Rather than dramatic, the apartment level inspired by *Old Boy* looks washed out in the studio's signature planes of pale colours. It's a little boring, and I'm not sure it helps that during a hallway fight, the camera switches to a side perspective to make the *Old Boy* homage unambiguous. It's cute, but isn't it more fun to notice subtle references?

FILM STUDIES

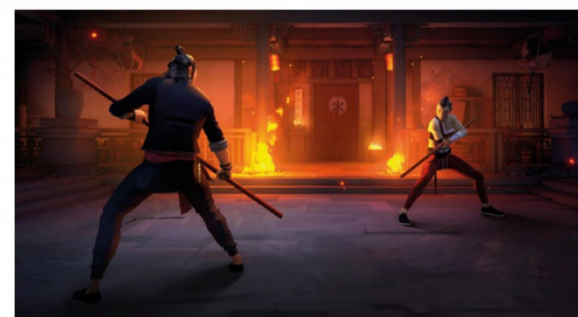
There'll be other overt movie nods in *Sifu*, but Tarno says you're not going to be barraged with them. That's probably for the best, although if there happens to be a clever reference to the original *Drunken Master*, I'm sure I'll turn around and declare that references are cool, actually.

In the demonstration, Sloclap also showed off a museum level which invites the player to use priceless artwork as weapons. I'm happy to accept that invitation, but the plain, slate grey museum walls weren't used to any interesting effect that I saw. I wanted exaggerated blood sprays to pop off that neutral ground, or for art pieces to shatter, or maybe for it to go all the way into the minimalism of *Ape Out*, or back to the strangeness of *Absolver* and its masks.

Tarno did hint that there are surreal scenes in *Sifu* that we haven't seen yet, so that's a good sign. I also have to mention that the museum contains a room with a giant swinging pendulum that knocks people on their asses – also good.

Seeing roughly how *Sifu*'s kung fu will interface with my thumbs hasn't changed my positive outlook for it, but it did confirm some assumptions and raise some new questions. Will the story take us beyond apartment buildings and nightclubs? How many ways are there to slam someone's head into an object? Are there any ladders, and can you humorously place them over someone and then punch their face through the rungs like Jackie Chan?

Tyler Wilde



1v1 fights look just as hard as the group brawls.

TARNO ISN'T SURE WHERE THE STUDIO WILL LAND ON DIFFICULTY SETTINGS

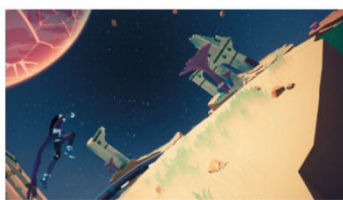
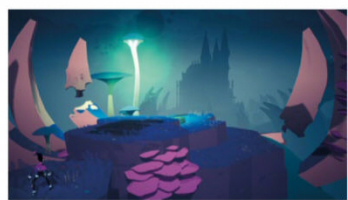


ABOVE: Max Payne moves are still cool when dodging bats instead of bullets.

LEFT: I bet that heavy punching bag comes into play during this fight.

PREVIEW

Solar Ash



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 26

DEVELOPER
Heart Machine

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

LINK
heartmachine.com

SOLAR ASH

Welcome to the goop

There's a moment, near the end of my recent hands-off preview of *Solar Ash*, where an inky black monster clambers over the moon and utterly fills the screen. Our protagonist, a Voidrunner named Rei, dashes over the shells that make up its hide, skating between weak spots like the boss was a level itself.

It's at this point that Heart Machine founder Alx Preston says, "This is the smallest boss by an order of magnitude."

Solar Ash shares plenty with Preston's previous work, the beautiful and singular *Hyper Light Drifter*. Both feature dream-like pastel worlds, a haunting Disasterpeace soundtrack, and a fashion sense that heavily favours masks. But over the course of our demo, it became clear that *Solar Ash* is a vastly more ambitious project than its predecessor.

The biggest change is that shift to 3D, which *Solar Ash* makes full use of with a pivot to platforming. But it's a specific kind of platforming that really catches me, drawing from the fast, effortless traversal of Sega classics like *Jet Set Radio Future* as Rei glides across this surreal world – skating and dashing and grinding around ancient temples with effortless flair.

Combat still exists, but enemies are more roadbumps than full-on martial contests. Instead, *Solar Ash's* dungeons are more interested in traversal challenges, our guide unlocking sections of an old tower by digging for the gooey weak spots of grotesque black growths

that have taken it over. The same thinking applies to the game's bosses. That giant bug is taken down by baiting an opening to jump onto its shell, and sprinting across its hide to smack weak spots in a precise order before its carapace turns to lava.

KICK ASH

Those quiet moments of exploration let us linger on how absolutely bloody gorgeous a thing *Solar Ash* is to behold. *Hyper Light Drifter* might have been a masterclass in pixel art, but its successor is something entirely its own – a surrealist world of pastel growths and towering mushrooms, where gravity is always subjective and nothing ever seems quite solid.

In part, that's because much of it isn't – Rei is often seen skating across seas of clouds, rendered with the same volumetric technique used by Media Molecule's *Dreams* to give them a fuzz that reacts to your movements with delightful physicality. There's a liquidity to the way Rei almost swims through the world that makes it feel oceanic, helped further by the presence of coral-like structures across the landscape.

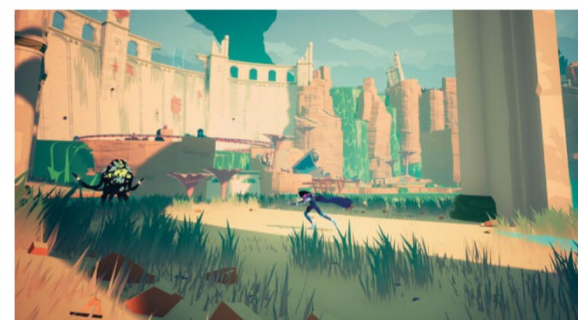
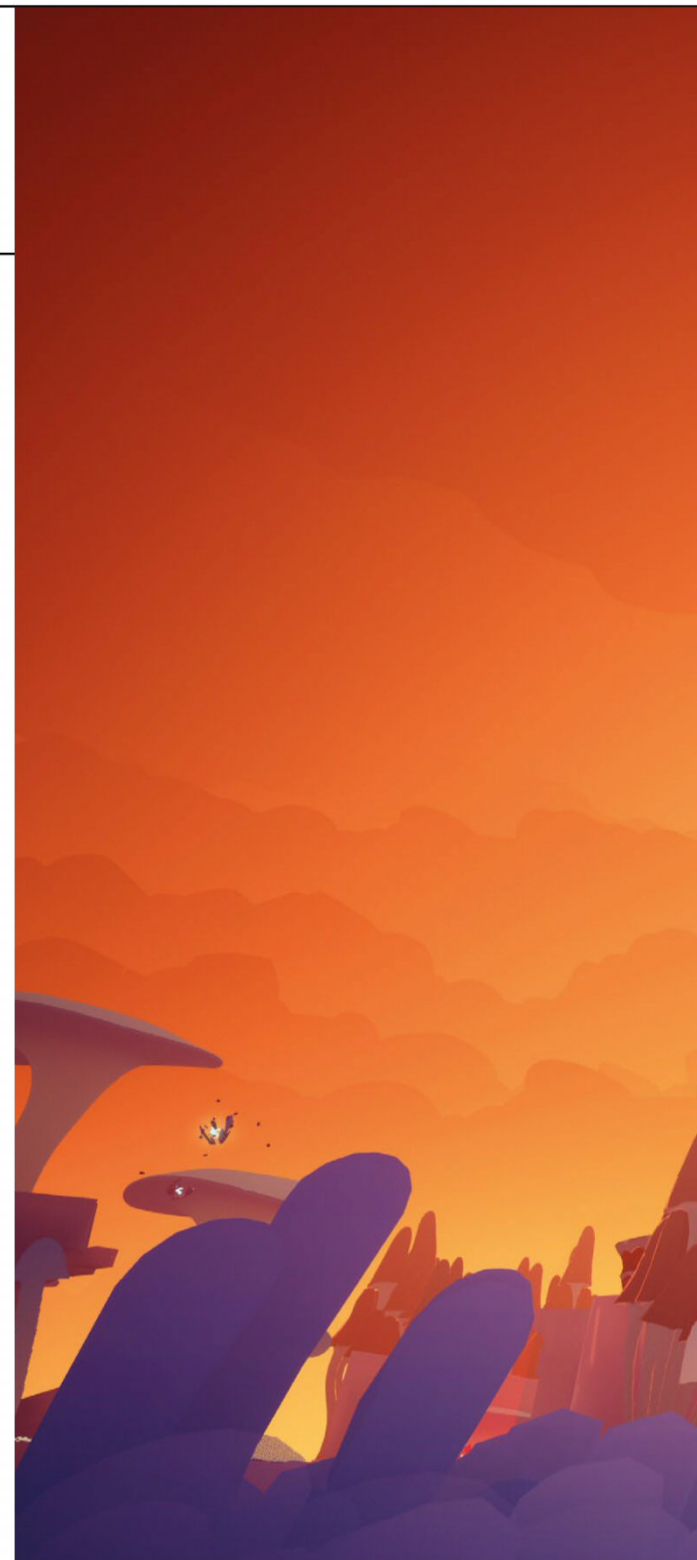
It's during these travels that *Solar Ash* feels most like *Hyper Light Drifter*, a game that dismissed writing entirely to focus on being a mood piece. *Solar Ash* looks to still have that, but it also has more explicit storytelling in the form of a fully voiced cast. Rei inquires her way through conversations, forms poems, and can call on CYD – an upgrade-dealing companion described as "if your kind aunt was a holographic robot network".

In a moment, we see a broader map formed of bespoke named locations, each an expansive world full of secrets to explore. I can only hope that within this vast scale, *Solar Ash* doesn't lose the heart that, even after five years, still gives me goosebumps whenever I fire up *Hyper Light Drifter*.

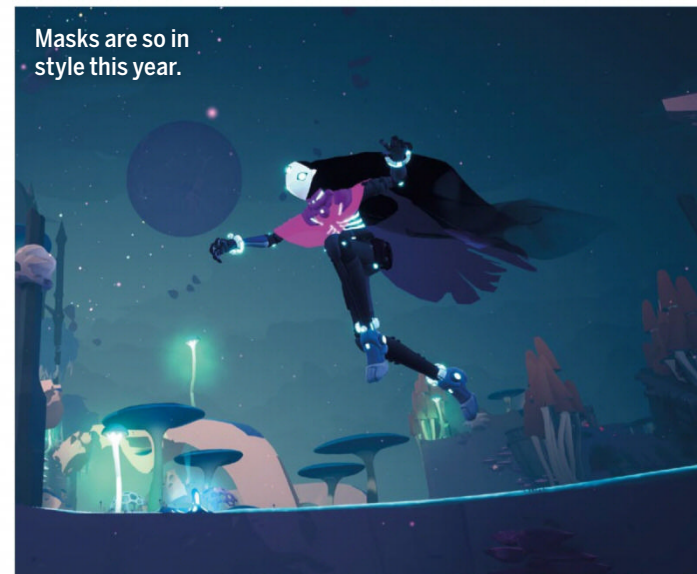
But where the Drifter was dogged by his own pain and dealt with it by lashing out, *Solar Ash* looks to offer a world where disparate people can band together to pull themselves out of despair. More power to you if you can escape said despair while pulling off some slick railsides off a centipede the size of a small moon.

Nat Clayton

THERE'S A LIQUIDITY TO THE WAY REI ALMOST SWIMS THROUGH THE WORLD



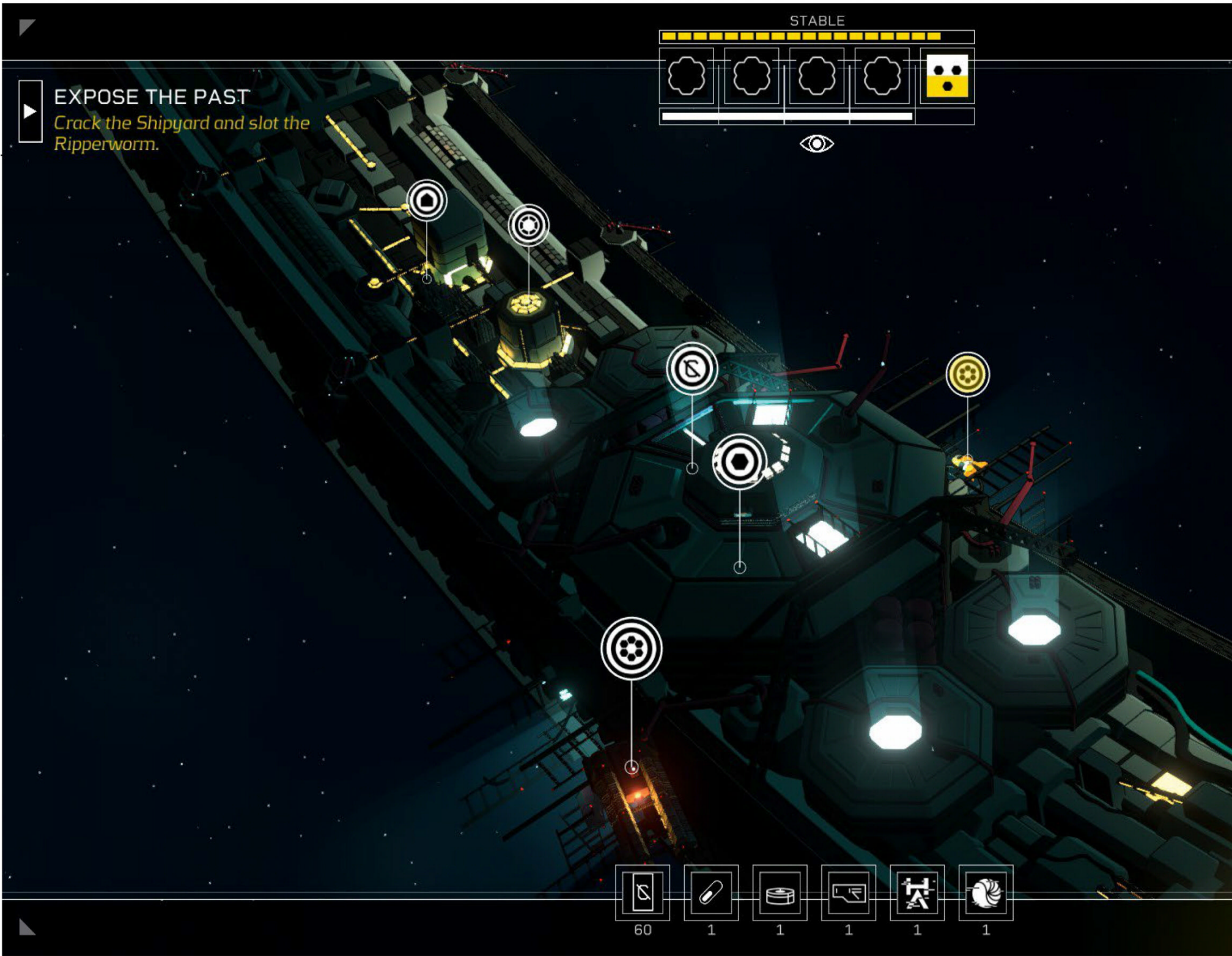
Masks are so in style this year.





ABOVE: Fried mushrooms, anyone?

LEFT: Up and at them, Voidrunner.



ABOVE: Each symbol on the ship signifies an event.

RIGHT: The classes – operator, machinist, and extractor – give you bonuses for ability checks.

NAME SLPR-021

CHOOSE CHARACTER CLASS

OPERATOR

An OPERATOR works with drones and high-precision remote machines to perform complex tasks from a distance. Sleepers assigned to OPERATOR work are usually cerebral and precise people.

PERK // TRANSFER INTERCEPT

Gain a small amount of CRYO after each INTERFACE action.

SKILLS

ENGINEER

0

Work with machines and physical tools.

INTERFACE

+1

Work with digital interfaces.

ENDURE

-1

Use strength or strength of will.

INTUIT

0

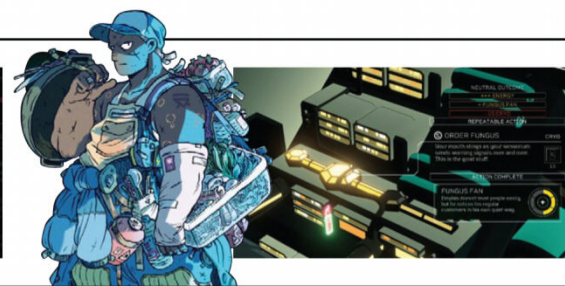
Approach problems with awareness.

ENGAGE

0

Approach a problem head-on.

START GAME



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2022

DEVELOPER
Jump Over the Age

PUBLISHER
Fellow Traveller

LINK
fellowtraveller.games

CITIZEN SLEEPER

A fascinating sci-fi RPG about an AI escaping corporate clutches

As your AI character in *Citizen Sleeper*, you don't remember much since sealing yourself in a container and being shot into space. The only thing you do know is that you're an escaped digitised consciousness in an artificial body called a Sleeper, owned by a corporation that desperately wants you back.

So, it's a pretty dire situation, but thankfully, your shipping container washed up on an abandoned space station named Erlin's Eye, a lawless interstellar society living on the brink of civilisation in the far reaches of the galaxy. *Citizen Sleeper* is all about beginning your new life as a runaway in this strange, often hostile city.

You experience the world of the space station almost entirely through text, your AI character vividly describing the sights, smells, and sounds of the bustling space station around you. Visually, you only see the exterior of the ship, but together with Guillaume Singelin's detailed character art of scrap salvagers, engineers, backstreet doctors, and street-food vendors, your imagination is given everything you need to piece together the unruly and chaotic world of the Eye.

In hopes of surviving each day, you'll need to pick up odd jobs for money, whether that's breaking down heaps of junk in the scrap yards, fixing up a space pirate's ship, or dabbling with resource trading. Each day brings new opportunities and the way that you

interact with the world around you is through dice rolls.

WIDE AWAKE

Citizen Sleeper is heavily inspired by TTRPGs, especially their dice systems. At the beginning of each day, you roll a set of dice and then assign them to tasks and events that are available on the station. The higher the dice, the better the outcome of the activity. During my first day, I needed to make some money and decided to take up a job manually sorting through metal salvage. I rolled a five at the start of the day and decided to assign it to the activity. The outcome was positive, meaning my Sleeper had done a great job and was paid for their labour.

Each new day triggers new story beats with more events and learning how to assign your dice wisely and not starve to death is at the core of *Citizen Sleeper*. Even if you get handed a fistful of ones and twos, there's always something useful to use them on. Being an AI means you can hack into the ship's mainframe to find secrets, and these events are the safest way to spend your low dice free of risk.

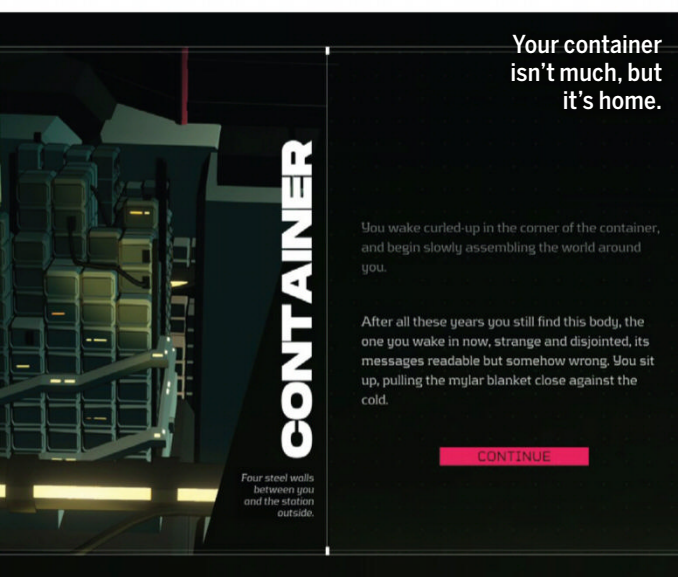
One detail I love about the dice is that to assign one to an activity, you need to manually click and drag it into the event's square, satisfyingly slotting it in place, just as you would if you were assigning dice on an actual TTRPG board.

There's more to life on the Eye than work, though. Part of your time on the ship is learning its secrets and how you ended up here in the first place, but getting answers means taking on riskier challenges. Events repeat themselves each day, but if you fail multiple times, something incredibly bad could happen. One event asked me to steal a set of dock plans, which risked putting me on the ship's security watch list. Not great for someone who's supposed to be hiding from an all-powerful megacorp.

So far, I'm completely bewitched with *Citizen Sleeper*'s sci-fi world, and I've only just scratched the surface. I need to know why the Sleeper is risking their life by running away, and why the evil megacorp is hunting them down. Unfortunately, answers will have to wait, as the game won't be coming out until at least 2022, according to the devs.

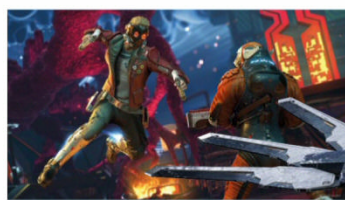
Rachel Watts

IN HOPES OF SURVIVING EACH DAY, YOU'LL NEED TO PICK UP ODD JOBS FOR MONEY



PREVIEW

Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

October 26, 2021

DEVELOPER

Eidos Montreal

PUBLISHER

Square Enix

LINK

bit.ly/39FDczl

MARVEL'S GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

A cosmic family holiday

My family holidays have a lot of chaotic energy. My memories of childhood trips abroad are always of arguments, getting lost, someone storming off and not being seen for a whole day, getting assaulted by local wildlife, and that one time a cowboy proposed to my gran. Playing *Marvel's Guardians of the Galaxy* is just like going on a Brown family holiday.

Marvel's cosmic heroes are in a bit of trouble with the space cops – this is around five hours into the game – otherwise known as the Nova Corps, and must take a detour to a precinct to pay a fine. When we arrive, naturally things go awry. It's deserted, our ship gets impounded, and we've got to find someone who will take our cash so we can get back to saving the galaxy. As we explore the ghost precinct, the eerie silence is broken by banter, with the quintet constantly commenting on things and, of course, arguing.

If you were to jump into the game at this point, with no experience of the Guardians, I suspect you'd pretty quickly get a clear impression of what they're all about. It's constantly reinforcing the team's personalities, whether it's through Rocket's constant complaining and insults, or Drax refusing to grab a free soda from a broken vending machine because it would be dishonourable.

GOOD LORD

Star Lord is the only character you can directly control, but you can still give your

HANDS ON

pals commands. Outside of combat, this seems to mainly be used to overcome obstacles like locked doors or blocked routes. In the Nova Corps precinct, Rocket gets to show off his skills by crawling through vents to get to hidden areas or fiddling with door consoles. There's also a hacking minigame where I have to work with him to reroute power to a door, a sequence that's elevated by the fact that I can reroute power to other objects, finding a hidden item in a toilet and creating more excuses for banter.

The Guardians are not your minions, though, and don't like to be bossed around. When faced with another locked door, selecting Rocket again just pisses him off. He wants to leave the precinct instead of continuing to explore it. Asking a second time makes him acquiesce, though there will be moments where the Guardians will simply refuse to do things because of prior decisions that you've made.

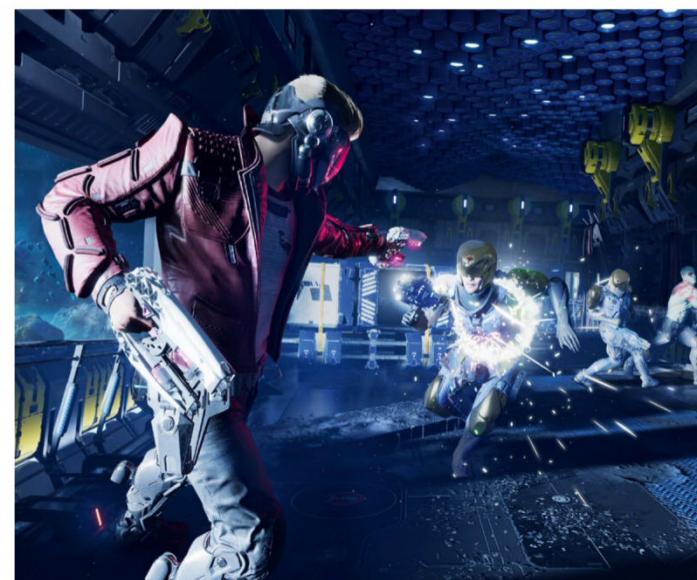
Star Lord's got a brisk, acrobatic combat style where he can dash across the battlefield with his rocket boots and pester enemies with elemental attacks. The other Guardians are pretty capable on their own, but throwing a bit of teamwork in there makes the world of difference. You can select a target, a character and an ability and then watch as your mate pulls off a flashy move, but what you're really trying to do is find synergies and use them to create openings. Groot can trap enemies with his vines, which is the perfect opportunity to unleash Star Lord's barrage attack.

PARTY TIME

When the chips are down, that's when it's time for an inspirational speech. This is essentially Star Lord's ultimate ability – one that feels true to the comics. With your buds inspired, the walkman comes out, the music starts blasting, and everyone gets supercharged. There is something very energising about watching my BFFs kicking the crap out of space cops to some cracking '80s bops. It gets the blood pumping.

The charismatic cast and surprisingly tactical brawls meant that when the demo ended I had to go back for another shot. It's a very reassuring sign, especially after the disappointment of *Marvel's Avengers*.

Fraser Brown



THE GUARDIANS ARE NOT YOUR MINIONS, THOUGH, AND DON'T LIKE TO BE BOSSED AROUND



ABOVE: When all else fails, a swift knee is nice and reliable.

LEFT: Rocket's never looked better.



Potion Craft



ABOVE: Unlocking the alchemy machine gives you access to more potion crafting capabilities.

RIGHT: Haggling with vendors is part of the job – just don't piss them off.

FAR RIGHT: Pick your fresh ingredients each morning from your garden.





NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£11.40

DEVELOPER
niceplay games

PUBLISHER
tinyBuild

LINK
potioncraft.com

POTION CRAFT

Concocting potions and brewing up a (literal) storm

Potion Craft is all about alchemy. You run a medieval potion store, brewing and selling an array of powerful beverages, ointments, and other arcane liquids. You've rocked up to a new town hoping to get your business up off the ground, all the while experimenting with different elixirs as you go.

It's a humble job, but one *Potion Craft* makes incredibly fun. It's a game that will bring out your inner merchant, whether you're a proud artisan only making the finest products, a scoundrel who cons customers with overpriced goods, or – if you're like me – a mischievous hag with an evil cackle who drives a hard bargain.

The abandoned wizard's hut you've moved into has everything you need to get a'brewing. There's a colourful garden filled with plants and mushrooms you can use as ingredients, a bedroom for resting and starting a new day, the front of the shop where you sell potions to customers, and a dusty basement with a huge, broken contraption built from glass jars and tubes. This alchemy machine is something you'll need to repair over time, buying various parts from merchants that come by the store.

The room at the heart of the hut is the most important, though, and that's the potion brewing room. Crafting in games can be a drag, but *Potion Craft*'s feels like every elixir is its own mystical journey. It's a clever system where your

current concoction is displayed as a little potion bottle in the centre of a magical map, and you need to add different ingredients to your cauldron to control the direction in which the little bottle travels. Then, when it's where you want it, perfectly placed on a magical symbol, you heat up the cauldron and poof! An enchanted potion will be brewed.

What's even better is that this system feels incredibly tactile. You need to do everything by hand. Popping ingredients into your cauldron, pushing down on the bellows to get the coals burning, and crushing plants to a fine powder all feels so satisfying. It's full of lovely little details, like when you're using the mortar and pestle both will get stained the colour of the ingredient, or when you complete a potion and your success is signaled by a little puff of magical smoke.

WORTH A SHOT

You can't just brew potions all day (as much as I'd like to). There's a business to run. Each day you'll get townsfolk coming to your store looking for liquid solutions to their problems. You can haggle for a higher price and even decline to sell to certain people, but all of your decisions will have an

impact on your reputation and your wallet. Selling poison to the shady, bearded dude might make your rep plummet, but there's a tasty lump of coin in it for your troubles. In the couple hours I played, there were hints of a larger story in play, and deciding to side with certain guilds, rubbing shoulders with nobles, or supplying potions to dubious underground groups impacted the wider narrative.

It's not clear how long *Potion Craft* will be in Steam Early Access, but developer niceplay games says it has plenty of updates on the way, including new brewing maps, potion effects, and ingredients. Those plans will certainly bring more to *Potion Craft*, but the sim is great as it is right now. I've already spent hours exploring the map and experimenting with bubbling brews. Together with its medieval manuscript aesthetic, *Potion Craft* makes for a delightful alchemist sim.

Rachel Watts

TOWNSFOLK COME TO YOUR STORE FOR LIQUID SOLUTIONS TO THEIR PROBLEMS



EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

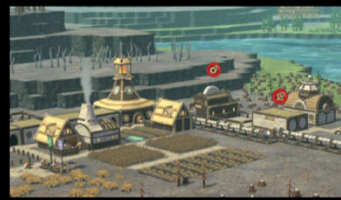
Timberborn



ABOVE: Something as impressive as this isn't as difficult to build as it looks.

RIGHT: "I'll have a pint of neck oil and a half of gamma ray"
"Wrong beaver town mate".





NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£19.50

DEVELOPER
Mechanistry

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
mechanistry.com

TIMBERBORN

Should you give a dam about this beaver themed city builder?

When the main thing a game has to distinguish itself from all the other city builders is its cast of beavers, what you really want is for it to fully lean into that. *Timberborn* doesn't quite put enough of its personality up front, but even at this point in Early Access it's a remarkably pleasant time.

Tasked with building an ever expanding settlement for your adorable little population of beavers, the game falls into a steady rhythm of unlocking new technologies while dealing with environmental changes such as droughts. As in the best management games, succeeding in *Timberborn* is all about a good juggling act. You have to ensure there's a steady supply of wood while also making sure there's plenty of housing and storage, while also making progress towards more useful buildings. Picking the right moment to invest in flour production or re-forestation is vital.

Yet *Timberborn* is gentler and kinder than most of its ilk, with circumstances rarely nose diving quicker than you can correct a mistake. There are harder difficulties for those who maybe want this game to be a tale of survival rather than prosperity, but that seems a poor match for the tone. The look and feel of it is the main draw. It's simple and inoffensive, with little hints of a history to its world where beavers seem to have inherited the earth. Simply put, it's a nice space to be in.

PLAYED
IT

FURRY FRIENDS

The aforementioned environmental events are one of the game's strongest ideas. Rivers, for example, can be disrupted or redirected, taking vegetation along with them. And, of course, that's something the player can trigger artificially too, by building characteristic dams. It's hardly *Populous*, but the world is malleable in ways that push you to build more organically rather than laying down the rigid tracks of a plan at the start of a session. Nurturing the forests and rivers around you, instead of just endlessly consuming everything around you, gives merit to *Timberborn*'s wholesome presentation. Your settlement feels like a home, not just a hungry machine.

But unfortunately there really isn't that much here to distinguish *Timberborn* from other, similar settlement builders. There is undeniable charm in its beaver denizens, as well as the novel wooden technology they build. It has personality but maybe not quite as much as I hoped. A bit more animation – perhaps beavers giddily gnawing down trees? – would give it a lot more life.

Not that I wasn't enamoured. I wanted to build my perfect little diorama of a town, giving those cute beavers a lovely home with amenities and nice views. Ensuring that the long chains of wooden gears necessary to power advanced structures didn't break up the nice streets of my settlement was as hard a task as any dry season. Balancing practical needs with aesthetic wants is the real conflict of the game and what kept me going for hours. Planning out that one little street with terraced houses or trying to sculpt a nice forest on the edge of town, while still making it a functional settlement, is the sweet spot for this kind of thing, and *Timberborn* nudges you into it with ease.

I'm not sure how long I'll stick with it, but its landscaping options and all the potential they open up for big brain thinkers might give it the edge to stay sharp for a while to come. And for those who simply want a settlement management game with cute beavers, *Timberborn* will do nicely.

Sam Greer

BALANCING PRACTICAL NEEDS WITH AESTHETIC WANTS IS THE REAL CONFLICT OF THE GAME



Sculpting your perfect diorama is still the goal.

EARLY ACCESS PREVIEW

Rogue Spirit



NEED TO KNOW

EXPET TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
Kids With Sticks

PUBLISHER
505 Games

LINK
roguespiritgame.com

ROGUE SPIRIT

A novel concept and a great look – but it's still a bit ethereal

Rogue Spirit has a neat little premise: you're the ghost of a long dead prince, who must save their kingdom by possessing the bodies of their enemies. Couple that with a colourful cel-shaded art style and it seems like an easy winner. Unfortunately, while it's not lacking in spirit, it's certainly a bit bare bones at this stage in Early Access.

Your goal in *Rogue Spirit* is to progress on successive runs. It is a roguelike, with all the staple elements, and only its central gimmick to hang them off of. There's a hub for buying upgrades, procedurally generated areas, and a host of randomised stats to play with. I do appreciate how quickly *Rogue Spirit* gets you into the action, with a mercifully brief tutorial and sparse dialogue. Within minutes you leave the safety of sanctuary and are out into the world to fight all manner of enemies. Yet it's here where it all quickly falls apart.

Combat is just a bit too floaty and fiddly to be satisfying, a concession I imagine to accommodate all the different enemy types you can control. There is some small pleasure in encountering a new foe and knowing that you can play as them, a little reward for each victory, but that's totally undermined if none of them are actually fun to fight as. A problem exacerbated by the game constantly pitting you against multiple foes, something very awkward to deal with in ideal circumstance and increasingly worse depending on your current form.

SOME RUNS WOULD THROW NEAR INSURMOUNTABLE OBSTACLES AT ME

PLAYED IT

The central gimmick feels a little underbaked really. On paper it's cool but in execution it's kind of just unpleasant to switch by necessity from one host to another, forced to adjust to a new move set and abilities. Games like this benefit from a chance at mastery, committing to a build and practising it to death, but *Rogue Spirit*'s central mechanic encourages experimentation. These games have always been about rolling with the punches, but the differences between enemy types are seldom as fun as they seem thanks to the awkward controls. As much as we hope for the magic of a run where the stars align, the best of these games make it a blast no matter what you end up rocking. Even when the stars align I don't feel all that excited by a run in *Rogue Spirit*. And the stars don't align often.

SPIRIT TRACKS

Even as I improved, some runs would just throw near insurmountable obstacles at me, like enemies that could heal each other or four assassins the moment I enter an area. The game will mention that you can revert to spirit form to explore undetected and plan the best time to attack, but 'ambush' is a generous way to describe 'potter about and then attack from a different angle'. You can always just run away, and some of my best and longest runs came from simply running past enemies and letting a small army trail me all the way to an area's exit. Unless you bother to return to the hub during a run with some trinkets or purchases then you retain absolutely nothing when you die. After a certain point, it's hard to stay motivated when the fundamentals of progress are so unengaging. This is a ghost I gave up on pretty quickly.

If the developers can polish those fundamentals, reduce some of the early punishment, and add more meaningful strengths to each enemy type you possess, then *Rogue Spirit* could harness its novel premise. For now it's trapped a bit in limbo, brimming with unfulfilled potential. Let's hope this spirit lingers long enough to make something more of itself.

Sam Greer



You'll be seeing more of this hub than you might want to.





ABOVE: Colourful and vibrant, it certainly looks the part.

LEFT: Sometimes running through entire areas is better than bothering to fight. A literal run.



SPORT



TECH



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NEW

The unique mechanics of the Mongols are a perfect symbol of what makes **AGE OF EMPIRES IV** unique.

AGE

By Robert Zak



The Mongols were a fascinating civilisation, spreading in all directions from the barren plains of the Steppe in a dust cloud of horses, yurt encampments, and a whole lot of pillaging. Yes, the Mongols killed an unthinkable number of people, but they were also brutal pragmatists who would much rather their enemies capitulate so they could recruit their finest generals, thinkers and troops to their cause. And if you refuse to surrender? Well, don't say they didn't warn you...

This meant that by the late 13th century, with much of the world from China to Hungary under its control, the Mongol empire was incredibly diverse – religious freedom, a super-squad of international generals, and prestigious scientific institutions that attracted scholars from Persia, China, even Greece.

Beyond Genghis Khan's marauding years, the Mongol empire became so vast and varied that it doesn't easily fit the traditional *Age of Empires* mould of distinct civilisations with their clearly defined traits and tropes. I sat down to chat with Relic about the Mongols in *Age of Empires IV*. Unsurprisingly, they're probably the most leftfield civ in the game, but they also encapsulate Relic's philosophy to make the the most asymmetrical – and tactically deep – *Age of Empires* game to date.

There will be four campaigns in *Age of Empires IV* – English, French,

AGE OF ODDITIES

Age of Empires has had some strange detours over the years



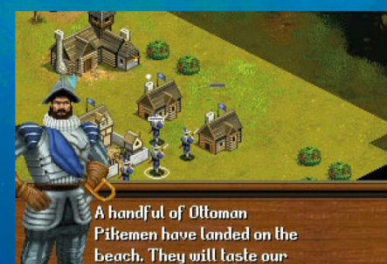
AGE OF EMPIRES II: AGE OF KINGS (PS2)

Sony's obelisk isn't something you immediately associate with *Age of Empires*. Get around the UI which occupies about 70% of the screen, and it's a functional port of the game that you could play with a friend via the i-Link cable.



AGE OF EMPIRES: AGE OF KINGS (NINTENDO DS)

The DS proved its worth as a strategy platform with *Advance Wars*, so *Age of Empires* wisely mimicked that formula, going turn-based and doing a great job of it. There were five civs with five campaigns, and even a multiplayer mode.



AGE OF EMPIRES III (NOKIA N-GAGE)

Sadly, we were unable to contact anyone who owned an N-Gage to find out if this was any good. What we do know is that it was real-time, had online multiplayer, and a single campaign where you defended Malta against the Ottoman Empire.

Mongol, and Rus – divided into 35 missions. What's interesting is that there is some historical overlap between them. The Mongol campaign, for instance, takes you deep into Europe where you eventually besiege Kiev, an important economic hub of eastern Europe. The chaos experienced by cities like Kiev and internal divisions among the Mongol lords eventually created an opening for the more northern city of Moscow to flourish, which segues neatly into the Rus campaign.

CAMPAIGN TRAIL

The Mongol campaign spans three chapters – the first up is Genghis Khan's well-known conquest of Jin China. The second chapter puts you in charge of legendary general Subutai and emperor Mongke Khan

in their European campaign that stretched into Hungary and Poland, before the third and final chapter charts Kublai Khan's push to take over the rest of China with the climactic Battle of Xiangyang.

But beyond the military conquests, Relic also wants to depict the

TOP: Mongol buildings will have a range of cultural influences, reflecting the diversity and expanse of the empire at its peak.

RIGHT: The Delhi Sultanate is a hotbed of scholarship, science, and war elephants.



A BIG PART OF RELIC'S PROCESS WAS TO GO HANDS-ON WITH THE HISTORY

diversity of these misunderstood people. "The Mongols have a reputation for being this unstoppable horde, but they were very good at recruiting locals to come work for them," says the game's narrative lead Philippe Boule. "So at one point you'll get to play as the famous Chinese general Zhang who ended up siding with the Mongols with Kublai Khan in his battle against the Song empire."

Of course playing as the Mongols will involve its fair share of meat-under-the-saddle horse archers and yurt encampments (more on those later), but you'll see that some of the Mongol landmarks as you enter new ages have Buddhist and Chinese influences too. In the latter stages of the campaign you will take Chinese gunpowder units to Poland, and even benefit from Persian engineering ingenuity.

During the Mongol war against the Song Dynasty (the final chapter

of the campaign), Kublai Khan summoned an engineer called Ismail from the Ilkhanate of Persia to design a revolutionary new counterweight trebuchet called the hui-hui pao to break the Song defences. So you'll get to use Persian-designed trebuchets used by Mongol forces led by Chinese generals – how's that for military multiculturalism?

A couple of years ago, creative director Adam Isgreen said that *Age of Empires IV* campaigns will portray "humanised histories", but didn't reveal any more about this intriguing idea. I ask game director Quinn Duffy what he meant by this. A big part of Relic's process was to go hands-on with the history, so members of the development team were flown to England and France on research trips, while film and audio teams were sent to Mongolia and eastern Turkey to meet the people continuing to live this nomadic (if less marauding) way of life.

"I think that idea of 'humanised histories' is about illustrating that these people – despite living 800 years ago – still have a pretty significant impact on our day-to-day life and were more sophisticated than we give them credit for," says Quinn. "In pop culture the medieval period is always dark and dingy, but the fact is it was colourful and full of life and interesting people and characters." This will partly be



COVER FEATURE

Age of Empires IV

**MONGOLIA'S SHAMANISTIC
RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS ARE
DEPICTED IN THE GAME THROUGH
THE OVOO, A SACRED STONE PILE**

depicted through hours of cinematic cutscenes which will take “a modern documentary approach”, combining video with animation to zoom into the day-to-day life of the civilisation’s inhabitants rather than just fawning over their leaders and military endeavours.

Expect to see little human touches like how colour paintings were created in the 13th century, or how the Mongols invented the Yam Network – an incredibly efficient mail system that revolutionised long-distance communication in the medieval world. “It’s always fun to take that history and figure out how gamers can use it to their advantage,” Quinn concludes.

MECHANISING TRADITIONS

So how do you turn Mongolia’s (probably more efficient) predecessor to the Royal Mail into an RTS mechanic? In-game, the Yam Network consists of towers that grant nearby Mongol units movement speed bonuses. So you will be able to,

THE MARCH OF TIME *Mongol units as they advance through the ages*

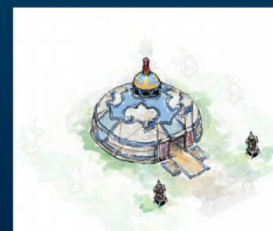
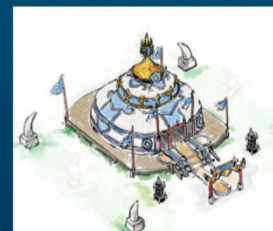
LIGHT INFANTRY



LIGHT CAVALRY



TOWN CENTRE





for instance, erect a chain of Yam towers between your market and trading settlements, or use them to quickly move troops to the frontlines or the flanks where you're anticipating an attack. Bringing in this Mongolian cultural element also helps make the Mongols a very fast-moving faction – as they were in real life.

Mongolia's shamanistic religious traditions are depicted in the game through the Ovoo, a sacred stone pile usually built on mountaintops. "We had to think, 'What's the biggest manifestation of a mountaintop in our game?'" says Philippe. "And we realised it's these giant stone deposits that have always been so central to the gameplay, so taking a cultural element like that and making it a central point of play is really rewarding."

Instead of mining stone like other civs (Mongols weren't too big on hunkering down behind stone walls), Mongols build an ovoo over a stone deposit, which grants nearby buildings bonuses in unit production and research. Once that stone deposit is exhausted, you can pack up the surrounding buildings into caravans and move on.

ON THE MOVE

Which brings us onto the Mongols' most distinctive trait: the ability to pack up every single building in a town (except for outposts) and seek pastures new anywhere on the map. If an enemy scout has passed through your territory and they know where you are, you can up and go, keeping your enemies second-guessing and anxious about the angle you'll strike from.

It may sound like a ridiculously powerful ability (as the real-world Khans would've attested), but it can also make

for a swift demise if you ferry your town centre in an undefended caravan. "There is a risk-reward in moving your town centre around, even though many people have done it to me with great effect," Philippe laughs, recalling the times when Mongol enemies would relocate their town centre to right outside his base.

Other players can counter this by anticipating where the Mongols will relocate to, with a likely destination being stone deposits where they can build their precious Ovoo. It can become a cat-and-mouse game, much in line with the elusive Mongol military tactics that helped them take over a good chunk of the world. They're a faction whose speed and elusiveness makes them seem like they're everywhere at once, casting the daunting illusion that they're bigger in force than they actually are.

The Mangudai, Mongolia's iconic horse archers, offer the perfect defence for your encampments when they're in transit, and were in fact proving to be such powerful units that they created a bit of a balancing headache for Relic. "The fact that they could shoot backwards

and kite made them very powerful, so trying to figure out how to balance them against the traditional counters of spearmen was a real challenge," Quinn tells me. "It'd have been very easy to just revert to RTS archetypes and really simple balancing, but it's been our remit to keep the civs as asymmetrical as possible, to preserve the history."

TACTICAL RELICS

Talking to Quinn and Philippe, their deep respect for the series is palpable, and it's clear that throughout development they've been wary of trying to reinvent a wheel whose spokes – judging by the ongoing success of *Age of Empires II* and *III* – never seem to need replacing, just reinforcing and tuning.

But Relic comes from a background where its greatest successes have been smaller-scale tactics games *Company of Heroes* and *Dawn of War I* and *II*. I was curious as to how much Relic dabbled with implementing more micro-level tactical elements into a series traditionally known for broader strategising.

TOP: Cavalry take advantage of the new stealth mechanics to ready an ambush.

RIGHT: The architecture of each civ is completely distinct – we'd recognise those Russian onion domes anywhere.



Newly scalable castle walls offer defensive bonuses and extended sightlines over trees



>> We know about the new ability to hide in forests and set up ambushes, but it's interesting to hear how Relic are bringing over a sightlines and elevation system similar to *Company of Heroes 2* to counter this. Set up outposts and towers around the map, and you'll be able to track enemy units sneaking around the woods.

Likewise, positioning units on the newly walkable castle walls will let them see over the treelines, and grant defensive bonuses to the archers and other units atop them. It adds a little

bit of stealth and verticality to the traditionally direct and flat *Age of Empires* experience.

Of course, *Age of Empires IV* will remain focused on macro-level play than the finer encounter-based design that Relic is best known for, but that doesn't mean there won't be some tactical nuance. "There's certainly some abilities on units that place importance on micro or tactical play," Quinn explains. "The French get pavises for shielding their crossbows, and the English get palings for their archers to counter charges."

MAKING HISTORY

But perhaps most revealing was how, after every little new feature and evolution that Relic mentioned to me,

they would eagerly emphasise right afterwards that they don't want to overhaul *Age of Empires*. "One of our vision statements was to keep reminding ourselves that the *Age* experience encompasses this huge breadth of gameplay," Quinn tells me. "And we didn't want to revert back to our tactical roots."

Relic's stressed that they're looking for *Age of Empires IV* to become a loved part of the series rather than the quintessential entry that renders all its predecessors obsolete. "There was never a goal to pull players off of *Age of Empires II*," says Quinn. "We're not here to seek conquest, we're very happy living alongside the other games in the franchise. Each of them offer things that are very unique."

Those are wise, peacekeeping words about a series that is unlike any other. *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition* is still in development and remains one of the most popular RTS games on Steam, and even the less storied *Age of Empires III: Definitive Edition* has a few thousand concurrent players. On the one hand it could be seen as an indictment on the RTS genre's lack of progress that one of its most popular games today is also one of its oldest, on the other it perhaps suggests that *Age of Empires II* pretty much nailed the formula all those years ago, and endures as much for its quality as nostalgia.

PUT TO THE STRESS TEST

And that's something I took from the multiplayer stress test that I spent the weekend playing. Despite all the talk of asymmetry, stealth mechanics, and packing entire towns

CHOOSE YOUR CULTURE

AoE IV features the series most diverse factions yet – so we asked Relic to help us rank them by how easy or hard each is to master

EASY



ENGLISH

Strong defence, standard resource collection, and of course the classic longbow-wielding archers make the English a safe and simple choice for beginners.



FRENCH

Powerful knights and gunpowder siege weapons make the French the Heavy Metal civ of the medieval era. Oh, and traders can deliver you resources if you're running low.

MEDIUM



ABASSIDS

Add wings to your House of Wisdom to fine-tune your empire's development, and gain bonuses for surrounding buildings. Oh, and you get camel units, which is fun.



CHINESE

Capable of building two landmarks in each age, then starting one of several dynasties, each with bonuses. There's a lot of variety in how you can develop China.

HARD



RUS

Hunters who gain gold with every wood drop-off, Warrior Monks who heal and fight, and a special Bounty system for killing animals on the map. It's a lot to get to grips with.



MONGOLS

Towns that you can pack up into caravans, Chinese generals, and stone mounds make this the most unconventional civ in the series, which is saying something...

THE NEW STEALTH AND AMBUSH SYSTEMS ARE NOT A HUGE OVERHAUL, BUT THEY DO ADD A WELCOME TACTICAL LAYER

into caravans, it still very much feels like *Age of Empires* (admittedly, I didn't get to play as Genghis and his Merry Horde).

Even the graphics and animations aren't as much of an evolution as perhaps you'd expect given that the last game in the series came out 16 years ago. Granted, the *Definitive Editions* of both *Age of Empires II* and *III* do an incredible job of bringing those games into the modern age, but in a way that speaks to the challenge facing *Age of Empires IV* – its predecessors still feel so current. With all that said, *Age of Empires IV* still feels good, and there's something comforting in those well-trodden loops of scouting

the land, skirmishing over resources, and – if you're me – wall-spamming so far out from your town centre that you wonder how this is still allowed in online games. Unit and building upgrade paths are still simple and satisfying, while keyboard shortcuts remain mostly where they should be.

The new stealth and ambush systems are not an enormous overhaul, but they do add a welcome tactical layer, bolstering that classic *AoE* hook that you can mess with, harass, and defeat your opponents in any number of different ways. The game still feels like an old-school strategic sandbox, which can be a good or bad thing depending on

where you align on the tradition-progress scale.

By decreasing the starting number of factions but increasing the differences between them, *Age of Empires IV* becomes not only a game that better captures the real-world historical diversity of its empires, but a rather more playful game too. Whether it will be the 'best' or 'ultimate' game in the franchise isn't as important as, in Quinn's words, "To stand as a unique new experience in the franchise."

And judging by how it looks a month before release, Relic is on track to deliver the most unique *Age of Empires* game, even if the margin by which they do it is a fine one. ■



ABOVE: Research included visiting modern Mongolian tribes, and even rebuilding a siege crossbow. That's dedication.

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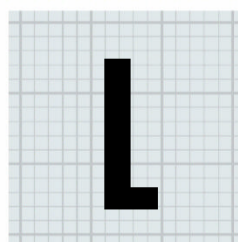
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THE MAKING OF DEAD SPACE

With a remake on the horizon, the developers of a sci-fi horror classic tell their story

By Robert Zak



Looking at the recent early footage of the *Dead Space* remake, the most striking thing is just how similar it looks to the 13-year-old original. Sure, it's shinier and glossier and your Plasma Cutter now sends flesh flying off Necromorphs like porridge in the wind, but overall it puts into perspective just what a masterpiece the first game was.

As gamers start derusting their Ripper blades and lubing their Line Guns with WD-40 in preparation for the remake, I've looked back with the developers of the original *Dead Space*

on how they brought together a uniquely timeless classic. When *Dead Space* creator and Visceral Games general manager Glen Schofield proposed a sci-fi horror game to EA, he says that "EA was a bit freaked out, because it was something they hadn't done since *System Shock*."

Schofield adjusted his idea into a potential *System Shock 3*, more with the desire to convince EA than to create a true successor to the immersive sim. This seeded the idea with the publisher, though the breakthrough came when *Resident Evil 4* launched in 2005. Suddenly, survival horror looked commercially viable again, and in the end it was the now-famous "*Resident Evil* in space" pitch that sealed the deal.



THE MAKING OF

Dead Space

» Many of the game's developers, including producer Chuck Beaver and production designer Ben Wanat, were brought onto *Dead Space* fresh from licensed titles in the Lord of the Rings and Bond franchises. "We were all coming from the straitjackets of working with licensed IPs where you have to obey all the rules really carefully," says Chuck. "So when this opportunity came to do the new IP, everyone was ready to fly wild creatively."

UI NOT?

One of the hallmarks of *Dead Space* (that's being retained for the remake) was the completely in-world UI; video communication and the inventory were hologram projections beamed from Isaac's suit, upgrades were purchased at machines with proper in-game screens, ammo counts were displayed on Isaac's weapons and – lest we forget – the health bar was elegantly displayed along the spinal ridges of Isaac's suit. The immersion was unparalleled.

One of the concerns when designing this UI was that it would be too bright – "lit up like a Christmas tree", as Ben Wanat puts it. But very quickly, Ben himself put those concerns to bed, according to Chuck Beaver. "He went away for a weekend and came back with a mockup of the UI that was so good that it ran through the entire series," says Chuck. "He did it all using the VFX system."

Ben's VFX mockup was so good that it was used until late in development. "Each of those little health bars was an effect, and eventually somebody in engineering changed the colour and we switched

it out for a proper tube and projected graphic," Ben tells me.

The ghostly grey-blue colour of these elements, especially in the video communications, helped evoke that well-founded feeling that you were chasing ghosts around the forsaken Planet-Cracker ship, The USG Ishimura.

ASSEMBLING ISHIMURA

At a time when 1080p wasn't yet the norm on most displays, the fine architecture of the Ishimura got a little lost amidst the jagged antialiasing and murky resolutions. But playing it on PC today, those uninviting ridges of the ship's

exterior look like they could skewer a meteor, and your eyes are drawn to the eerie shadows lingering in distant corners of larger spaces. There's a harsh texture to this ship, which seems to groan and breathe with mechanical menace.

Art director Ian Milham fills me in on the associations and inspirations for the Ishimura. "It was a mashup of gothic cathedral and offshore oil rig – both are huge in scale and deconstructed, with their guts clearly visible," he tells me. "The light fixtures were based on dentist's lights, which have a lot of uncomfortable and scary connotations. The signage was

The designers were obsessed with parallaxing in big spaces, resulting in ominous shadows and a sense of sci-fi gothic grandeur.

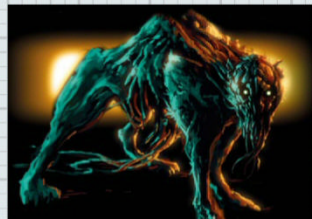
BEAST MODE

Dead Space nearly had evil animals, as these concepts show



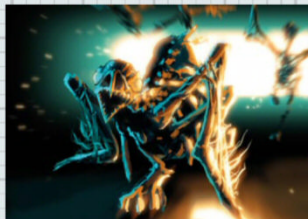
CAT

The developer figured spaceships would favour hairless cats, because they don't shed fur into air ducts. And it makes them extra creepy when they're turned into Necromorphs.



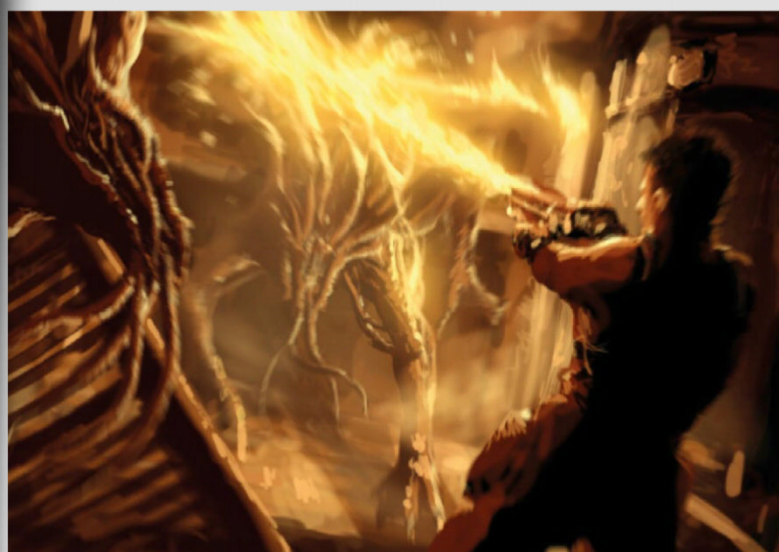
DOG

Maybe a little too close to The Thing, eh? Makes sense that humans would bring dogs into space, though – they're man's best friend. Unfortunately that the Marker would've turned them into man's worst enemy.



CHICKEN

According to the dev's notes, chickens' small size and egg laying make them perfect space companions. But as alien hosts, they're reduced to "a squealing mass of beak and sinew". Lovely.



ABOVE: Some of the developers regret not having more kinesis-based puzzles in *Dead Space*.

FAR LEFT: The glowing golden hue is a running theme through *Dead Space*.

inspired by Japanese subway signs, since they also are helping people through a labyrinth environment.”

But the Ishimura wasn’t always such a gracefully gloomy space. “When making the prototype for the original Xbox, we built some corridors and areas of the Ishimura, and it looked like the walls were made out of chainsaws and claws and stuff,” Ben recalls. “I was like, ‘It’s a little on the nose, you know?’ So the ship wants to kill you? No shit, there’s bleeding fangs sticking out of the walls!”

Soon after this, Ben took a lead role in crafting details into the Ishimura. “I would carve into the negative space to create lots of claustrophobic 90-degree bends, silhouettes and basically anything I

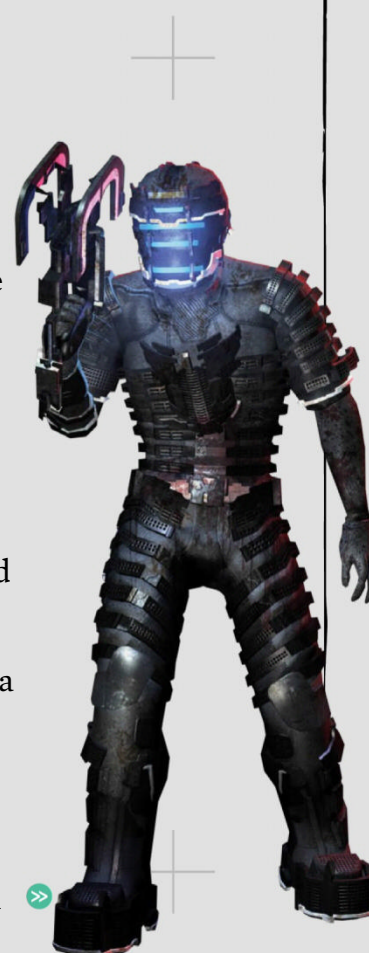
could do to fuck with your head while you were moving through the space,” he says. “The basic thing was to get parallax everywhere we could. Parallax always gives you constantly shifting shadows and points of view on the room.”

**“SO THE SHIP WANTS TO KILL YOU?
NO SHIT, THERE’S BLEEDING FANGS
STICKING OUT OF THE WALLS!”**

Early in the game, the Engine Room showcases this sensory intensity; the space is enshrouded with fog, with strange shapes and shadows cast by the gut-like pipes and aggressive geometry of the space. You feel like you’re deep in the bowels of a machine, always threatening to swallow you up.

Few horror games play on the tension between power fantasy and powerlessness quite like this. Isaac may be an engineer, but his two key abilities let him slow down time and lift heavy metal equipment by pointing his hand at it – probably the two hippest videogame superpowers of the 2000s. He’s a metalclad medieval knight with a sci-fi makeover, slicing down enemies whose spindly appendages are just begging to be severed by his power tools.

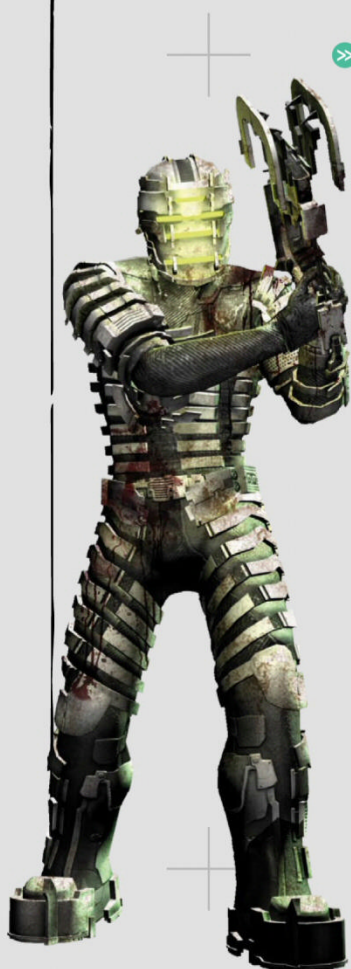
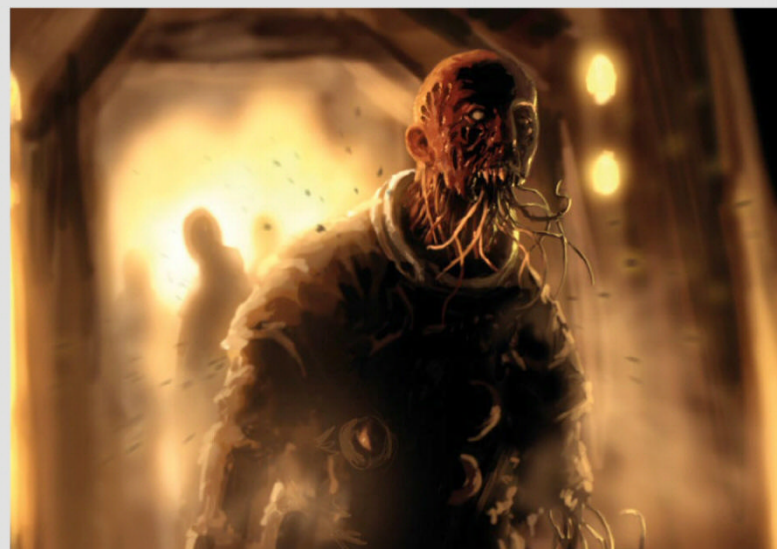
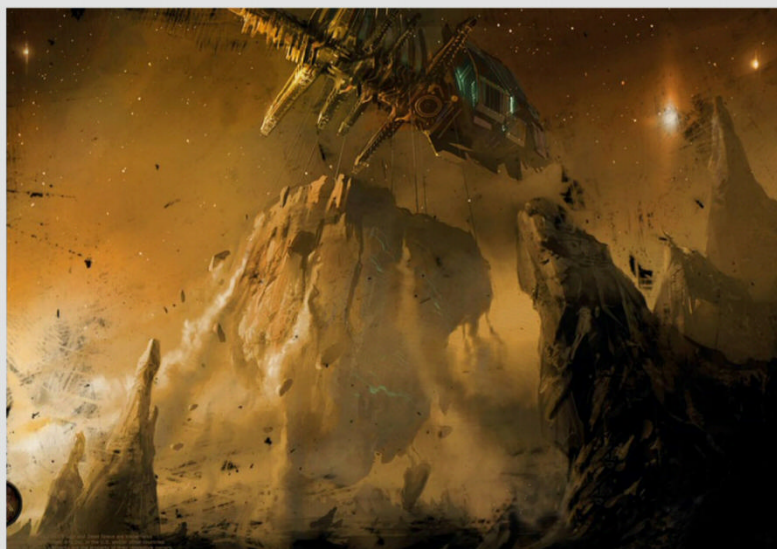
But despite your formidable arsenal, *Dead Space* always feels like a struggle, largely thanks to Isaac moving around very much like the metal-coated man that he is. He’s a slow runner, turns with the deliberation of a cargo ferry, and inexplicably stops for a second when





ABOVE: Limbs or no limbs, the Necromorphs keep coming at you.

RIGHT: *Silent Hill*, *Resident Evil*, and the *Alien* films were all influences.



» you change weapons (prompting so many screams of “What the fuck are you doing Isaac?!”).

This cumbersome movement was of course inspired by *Resident Evil 4*, but in a new console generation shaped by fast, fluid shooters like *Halo*, *Call of Duty*, even *Gears of War*, Visceral had to adapt to the changing times.

“We installed *Resident Evil 4* tank controls in *Dead Space*. It was really slow, and you couldn’t move while firing,” Chuck tells me. “We were so enamoured with that system at the time we were making *Dead Space*. The team was like, ‘This is a survival horror game, you’re supposed to be clunky.’”

But these idealistic visions of survival horror had to be

compromised. “It took three focus tests to make it clear that the audience had moved on from old-fashioned horror controls,” he says ruefully. Shoot-and-move was reinstated, and very late in development Glen altered Isaac’s

“WE INSTALLED RESIDENT EVIL 4 TANK CONTROLS IN DEAD SPACE. IT WAS REALLY SLOW”

animations to create the illusion that he was moving faster than he actually was.

Little did Visceral know that years later videogame horror would return to that slower, panic-inducing pace with games like *Alien: Isolation*, *Resident Evil 2: REmake*, and the upcoming *Dead Space* remake.

SEVERANCE SLAY

The Necromorphs were a unique kind of threat – fragile yet threatening. You could blow a running Necromorph’s legs out from under them, with the momentum sending their upper body hurtling towards you. It appears dead, but then props itself up by its claws and b i ns crawling towards you. Even though the creature is crippled and at the mercy of your heavy metal boots, it’s relentless in pursuing you.

The Necromorphs took quite a bit of tweaking and stretching to feel readable and fun. “We started elongating limbs and making things thinner, creating kind of exposed pulpy areas where there’s a little bit more of an obvious connection to where the dismemberment point was

going to be," says Ben. "We used weakspot in some areas, but the glowing weakspot is such a horrible cliché that we tried to refrain from it where we could."

Dead Space had its share of in-your-face scripted thrills, but there were some neat systemic tricks too, such as the vents that Necromorphs may or may not ambush you from depending on how close you stood to them. "It was a really intricate system of vents that we built throughout the game," Glen tells me. "If you listen, you'll actually hear enemies crawl through the vents, and whenever we could we'd try to have a real enemy in there."

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Visceral imbued *Dead Space* with its own strong identity, while borrowing from the great works in its genre. Glen Schofield happily admits that the air-raid siren you hear in the game's ambience is an homage to Akira Yamaoka and the nightmare sequence in *Silent Hill*. The hallucinations and dementia angle came relatively late in development, and were pushed by Ben Wanat's love of *Solaris*, while its almost anachronistic twist on *Resident Evil 4*'s control style has aged surprisingly well, making the game feel more timeless than many of its contemporaries.

When I ask the developers what *Dead Space* remake needs to retain from the original, the unifying theme is immersion, with Ben Wanat zeroing in on the audio in particular. "As long as they understand the essence of what's happening with that audio mix and why almost all of the psychology of the terror of that game is from the audio, then I think they're on a really good path," he says.

That *Dead Space* essence will also be palpable in another upcoming game. Glen Schofield is currently working with his new studio Sledgehammer Games on *Callisto Protocol*, a spiritual successor to *Dead Space* set on a prison colony on the titular Jovian moon. One of the key lessons he's carrying over from *Dead Space* is to be unpredictable in delivering scares.

Glen recounts how at one point during the development of *Dead Space* an executive proposed a 'horror meter' that creates a scare on a 20-minute timer. "That is the exact opposite of what I want," says Glen. "Something I'm taking into *Callisto* is that scaring intention is almost like a gut feel when you're making it. There's no 'right' timing it's really a matter of how you feel as you're going through the game."

One thing that's certain is that the *Dead Space* remake developer, Motion Studios, is working with a finely crafted masterpiece, whose own sequels showed how hard it was to build upon. Perhaps the best advice for the team behind the remake is to make like Isaac: tread carefully, target the weakpoints, and leave the rest of the body intact. ■

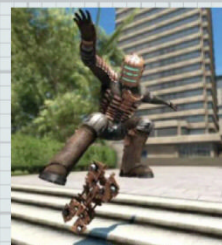
Isaac's suit was beautiful, making him resemble a medieval knight with a sci-fi makeover.

ISAAC THE EA ICON

EA loved having *Dead Space*'s hero cameo in other games



DRAGON AGE 2
We've said it before, Isaac's armour is perfectly suited to a fantasy-medieval type setting. The 'Ser Isaac' armour in *Dragon Age II* is a case in point.



SKATE 3
I can't imagine all that metal on Isaac's suit is great for catching air, but at least his safety-first suit comes with integrated knee and elbow-pads.



TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR
Isaac's golfing debut may seem strange, but it was later revealed that the *Dead Space* engine was a fork of that used in PGA Tour.



PLAYSTATION ALL-STARS BATTLE ROYALE
Sony's attempt at *Smash Bros* always lacked that star quality, but we got to see Isaac called in as a DLC character.



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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



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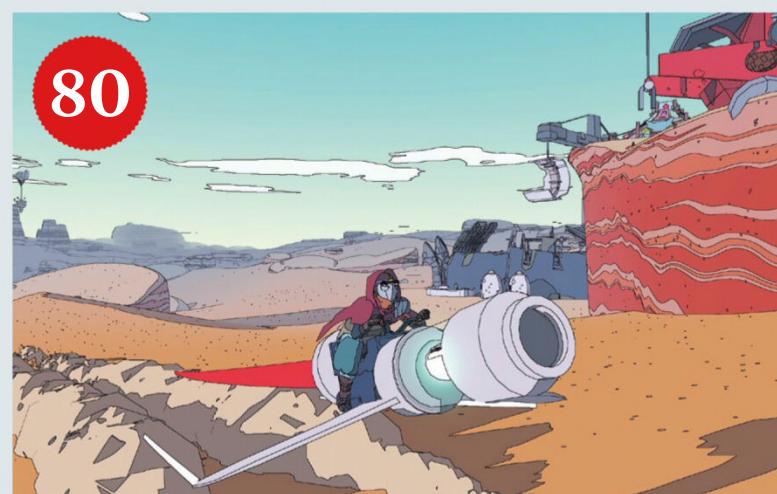
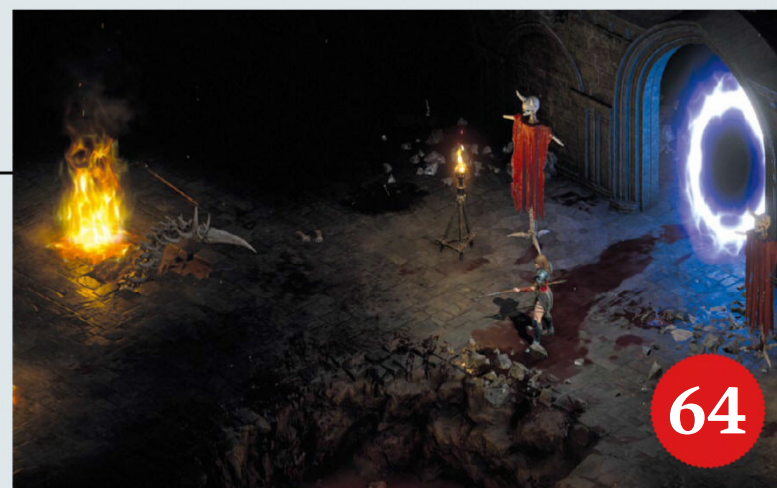
I am not a man given to nostalgia when it comes to gaming. I certainly played and enjoyed many games in my now distant past, but any time I've returned to them – whether in their original form, or as a shiny remaster – I find myself not transported back to a happy earlier time, but instead merely frustrated by old-fashioned ideas and outdated design. I am, therefore, very much not the target audience for *Diablo II: Resurrected*, and perhaps, judging by the success of many other, similar releases, out of step with the average PC gamer entirely. Am I too preoccupied with shiny novelty, and failing to appreciate the greats of the past? Or are you lot just a bunch of backwards-looking regressives trying futilely to recapture your childhoods? Let's just count ourselves lucky that in the wide landscape of gaming today, we are both bountifully catered for.

ROBIN VALENTINE
PRINT EDITOR

robin.valentine@futurenet.com

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This month's endlessly-repeating reviewers...



PHIL SAVAGE

Specialist in
Persistence

Currently playing
Deathloop

This month
Did his first review in
ages! And has been
catching up on his
emails ever since.



FRASER BROWN

Specialist in
Gamer crimes

Currently playing
Gamedec

This month
For the first time ever,
had to pull out Google
Translate in order to
review a game.



JODY MACGREGOR

Specialist in
D&D 3.75

Currently playing
Pathfinder

This month
Became an angel. Of
course, in our eyes, he
already was.



NAT CLAYTON

Specialist in
Jetbike engineering

Currently playing
Sable

This month
Got to play a game
that's so her we were
surprised to find out
she didn't make it.



RACHEL WATTS

Specialist in
Reading auras

Currently playing
Life is Strange

This month
Learned to psychically
'see' emotions, such
as our 'anger' at her
eating the last 'biscuit'.



TOM SYKES

Specialist in
Animal physics

Currently playing
Alpaca Stacka

This month
Learned exactly how
many baby chickens
you can balance on
top of an alpaca.



MATT ELLIOTT

Specialist in
Stiff upper lips

Currently playing
Strange Brigade

This month
Did what he does
best: talk about the
glory days of the
British Empire.

TIME OF YOUR LIFE

With **DEATHLOOP**, Arkane is rewriting what an immersive sim can be

By Phil Savage

Arkane Studios is calling me out. It knows how I played *Dishonored 2* – quickloading away any mistake in pursuit of a perfect stealth playthrough. And given that almost 30% of Steam players have the achievement for finishing a mission without being spotted, I suspect I'm not alone. Despite having a suite of tools, we ignored them in favour of the most OP button on our keyboard: F9. With *Deathloop*, quicksave is gone.

Deathloop is all about what happens when things don't go to plan; about panic and improvisation; about learning from a mistake, and taking those lessons forward. Trapped in a time loop, it doesn't matter if you botch your way through combat encounter after combat encounter – it doesn't even matter if you die and get kicked back to the beginning of the day. All that matters is that, in doing so, you gained some information that will help you the next time around.

Information is how you find and kill the Visionaries that act as the bosses of the island. There are eight in total, and your job as the amnesiac Colt Vahn is to take them all out in a single day in order to break the loop. Your problem is that the day is split into four chunks – morning, noon, afternoon, and evening – and you can only visit one of the island's four areas during each period. The Visionaries only appear in certain locations at certain times of the day, and at first it doesn't seem possible to

kill them all before the loop resets and your work is undone.

As you dig into the lives of your hit list, though, you'll uncover new ways to manipulate them. This is the bulk of the game, and your progress is tracked and updated as each new lead is uncovered. Colt is one of only two people whose memory remains intact when the day loops, which means his targets'

behaviour remains consistent, and thus repeatable. It's immensely satisfying as the pieces start falling into place – as you see the consequences of your actions, and start filling out your itinerary in preparation for that perfect day.

The process of gathering information doesn't just apply to your primary objective, either. It turns out that looping repetition leads to a more organic sense of discovery that suits the immersive sim genre well. For instance, my first visit to Aleksis's party in the Updaam district of Blackreef was an embarrassing

Immensely satisfying as the pieces start falling into place

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A stealth shooter set in a time loop. Think *Dishonored* meets *Outer Wilds*.

EXPECT TO PAY

£50

DEVELOPER

Arkane Studios

PUBLISHER

Bethesda Softworks

REVIEWED ON

RTX 3080Ti, 32GB RAM, Ryzen 7 3700X

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

bethesda.net/en/game/deathloop

disaster. It's the most dangerous area in the game – all of the guests are packing heat – and so my botched stealth attempt became a protracted hunt, as I desperately attempted to run and hide, only to be caught anew.

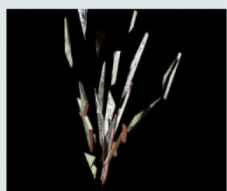
In the end I prevailed, but only after killing everyone in the building. With that done, an opportunity presented itself. I was free to explore in peace; to work backwards from inside the building and discovering the routes that linked them. When I returned the next day, I was prepared. It still descended into chaos in the end, but did so on my terms.

It's clear that *Deathloop* wants to nudge you away from obsessing over a flawless run. When you take out an Eternalist, they instantly fade into a sort of swirling ethereal mist that others can detect and react to. That means you can't spend hours neatly clearing out the map, hiding each body so that your handiwork is never detected. *Deathloop* wants you to be pressured into slipping up; to cause a situation that you're forced to react to. And then, when you do, it lets its weapons and powers feel fun to use, and, crucially, never punishes you for taking advantage of them.

At first, you start each day carrying only the basic weapons Colt has on him when he wakes up. Pretty early, though, you unlock the ability to infuse items – letting you carry them between loops. This is done by spending residuum, a resource harvested during missions or earned by sacrificing other, unwanted bits of gear. Infusion lets you permanently unlock better equipment to use. The best, of course, is held by the Visionaries themselves, who carry high-tier gear and a signature 'slab' – a power in the mould of *Dishonored*'s supernatural abilities.

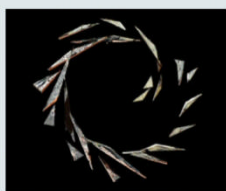
You're restricted in the number of weapons and slabs you can take on a mission, so if you see something you want in the field, you'll have to swap it with something you're already carrying. Dropped weapons and slabs

SLAB CITY Your guide to Deathloop's powers



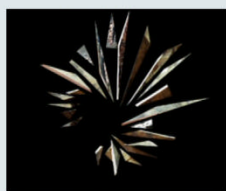
HAVOC

Do more damage, take less damage. Stealth is for losers. Kill 'em all.



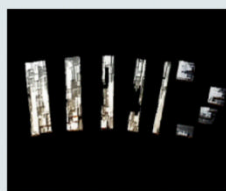
NEXUS

Magically link enemies together. When one dies, they all die. Efficient!



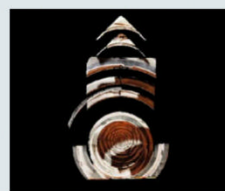
KARNESIS

Fling your foes. Also has an upgrade that makes them explode on impact.



AETHER

Be invisible. As you might imagine, this is pretty useful in a stealth game.



SHIFT

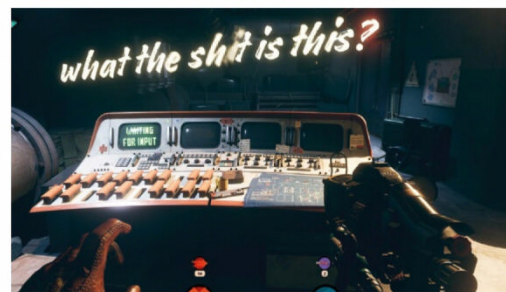
Teleport a short... I don't need to explain this: it's Blink from *Dishonored*.

Julianna: not your biggest fan.



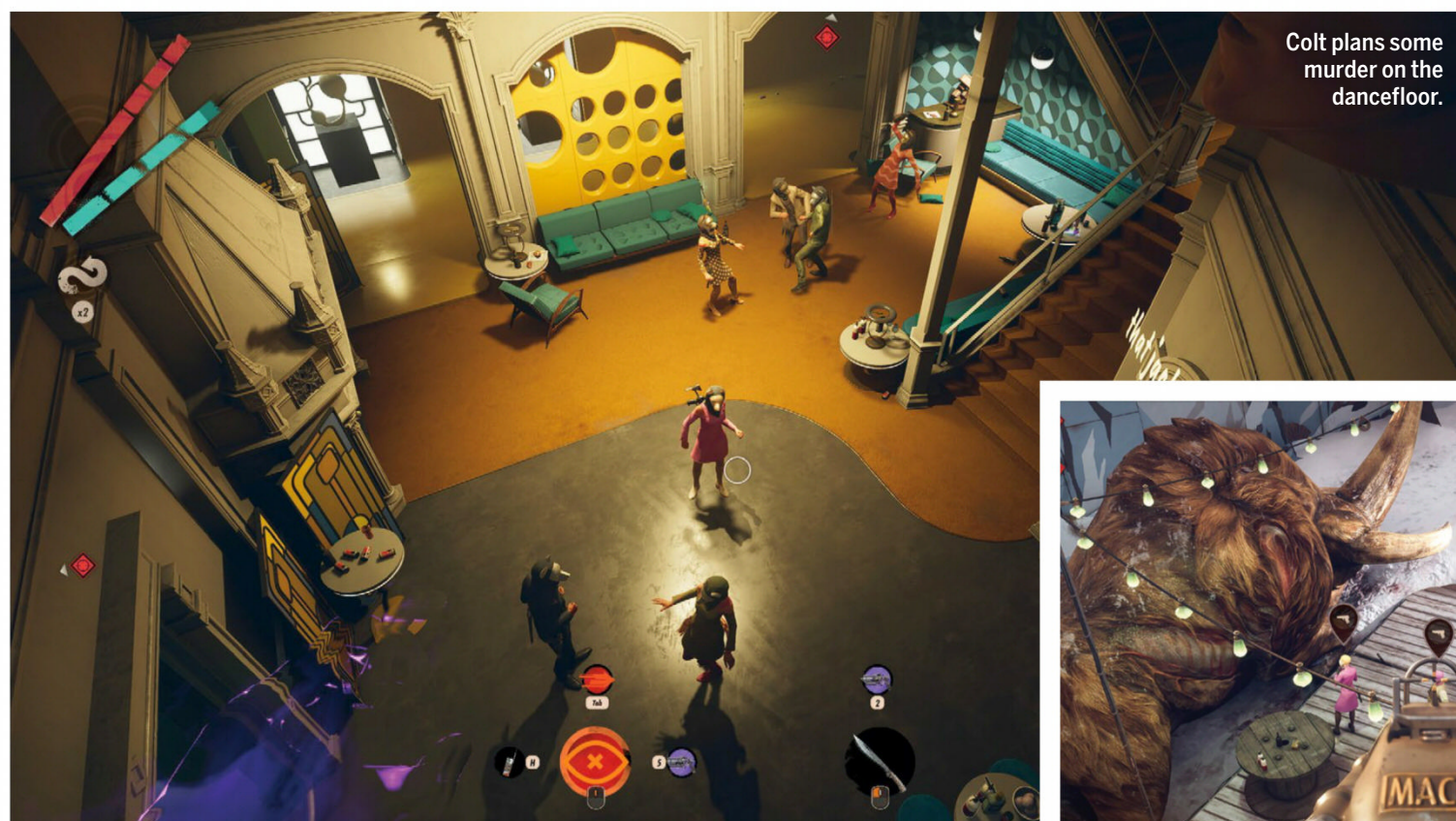
FAR LEFT: Colt wakes up on the same beach every morning.

LEFT: Live your best life.



TRANSFORM 4

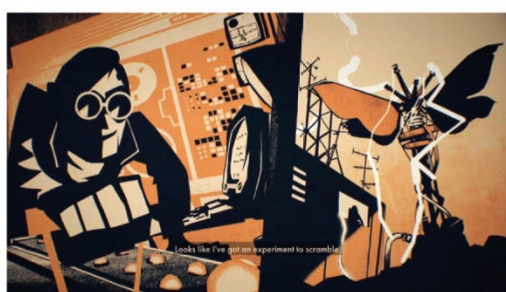
Stealth is fine, sure, but maybe shotgun frenzy is better.



Colt plans some murder on the dancefloor.



RIGHT: Animated cutscenes track Colt's progress.



FAR RIGHT: A face of pure indifference.



Found a fight? Pop Havoc to keep you going for longer.

are unavailable for the rest of the day. But thanks to the properties of infusion they'll be waiting for you at the start of the next loop.

CHAOS THEORY

Another early power lets you respawn twice on the map without dying and thus resetting your loop. This means you can shrug off the occasional stupid mistake or botched encounter. If you can successfully return to your body without dying again, you can retrieve the residuum off your corpse and carry on as normal. At every stage, the game is telling you not to worry. Enjoy yourself. Don't sweat the mistakes.

You see, Arkane Studios is also calling out Arkane Studios; in particular *Dishonored's* central tension of giving the player a suite of tools for murder and mayhem, but using the story to admonish you for using them. There's no such thing as a non-lethal playthrough of *Deathloop*. Your basic stealth weapons are a machete and a nail gun. Colt's idea of a silent takedown is snapping an Eternalist's neck.

You can tell that *Wolfenstein's* MachineGames played a role in *Deathloop's* development. The guns are chunky, powerful, and cacophonously loud. That said, the increased focus on violence and combat does accentuate some weaknesses in the AI. It can be easy to cheese combat encounters, using corners or doors to funnel enemies into a killzone. But between the guns, the tools, the more combat-focused slabs, and the free respawns, it just feels more exciting to embrace the chaos and wade into the mess.

Throughout the game, there's a voice telling you that, actually, you love this. That's not me making some grand point about the duality of man or something: there's literally a voice – one coming from the other end of your radio each time you step into a new level. It belongs to Julianna, the other person on the island whose memory persists through each day.

Her job is to protect the loop by hunting and killing Colt. And it's a task she revels in.

This cat-and-mouse relationship is the heart of *Deathloop's* story, and enhances the mystery of the loop, the island, and Colt's past.

As antagonistic as their conversations are, it's also clear Julianna enjoys their game. At one point she clarifies to Colt that she doesn't love watching him die, she simply loves killing him. There's a playfulness to her goading, but also an underlying frustration that makes uncovering the past that Colt can't remember very intriguing.

INVADERS MUST DIE

Julianna's hunts are also the final piece of *Deathloop's* systemic puzzle, the thing that ties its various riffs on the immersive sim genre together. She can invade any level that contains a Visionary, and – if you play with online enabled, at least – will be controlled by another player. With an entire level as your playground, this leads to some incredibly tense encounters, but also plenty of slapstick shenanigans. Once, a player invaded me but didn't realise I'd already hacked some of the nearby turrets. They spawned, I heard a turret start to fire, and moments later the game told me Julianna had been killed.



Colt is more heavily favoured in these encounters, because Julianna can't respawn when killed. Ultimately that imbalance is for the best. For Colt, the stakes are higher. Dying during the loop means losing access to any weapons or upgrades he gathered during that level – as well as any picked up earlier in the day that haven't yet been infused. As Julianna, meanwhile, your progression is tied to feats performed during your hunts. Even if you don't end Colt's day, a decent performance will still net you points towards unlocking more weapons, powers, and upgrades.

Ultimately, most Julianna encounters are resolved in an open firefight, which is the key to why so much of *Deathloop* is constructed the way it is. Why can I only equip a handful of weapons and powers? Because building a loadout is more interesting if Julianna is a potential threat. As the game progressed I started to favour a loadout that counterplayed an invasion: equipping slabs like Aether, which turn Colt invisible, and guns that would be overkill for a basic Eternal, but offered damage-over-time effects that could panic a human player.

For the first few hours of *Deathloop*, I was more interested in it as Arkane's response to *Dishonored* – a series that I love. I was enjoying myself, and looking forward to uncovering the mysteries of the island, but was more intrigued by what Arkane was saying about the genre as a whole, and about the way people played its previous games. It wasn't until another player invaded my game that it all clicked together, and I started enjoying *Deathloop* on its own terms.

After around 25 hours, I may have completed the story, but I'm still not done: I want to complete the remaining puzzles to see what new weapons and upgrades are out there, and learn how they can help my fight against Julianna in the future. And I want to see how the hidden routes I discovered as Colt can help me be a better invader against other players less familiar with the levels. Colt might be determined to break the loop, but I'm not in any rush. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An entertaining stealth shooter in its own right, but it's the multiplayer invasions that make *Deathloop* sing.

89

At every stage, the game is telling you not to worry. Enjoy yourself

BAY AREA

Welcome to Karl's Bay

1 The Yervha machine asks you trivia questions about the island. Does a great prize await you if you answer them all? No.

2 This is better: at night, Charlie runs a game that asks you to find explosive boxes for... reasons. There's a new gun for doing so.



3 Oh no, Julianna has invaded and the tunnels have been locked, blocking your escape. Hack the antenna to flee the area.

4 There's a lad on this cliff playing the guitar throughout the day. I like to just leave him be. He's not hurting anyone.

5 This hangar is where Harriett gives a sermon to her cult. Since Harriett is one of your targets, you'll visit a lot.

KENA KICK IT?

Playing the soul survivor in **KENA: BRIDGE OF SPIRITS**

By Luke Kemp

Kena: Bridge of Spirits is a looker, and the Pixar comparisons that have been flying around are justified. The lush world and its inhabitants radiate with personality. Even the bulbs of corruption that plague the land are oddly attractive. Kena's got the Hollywood looks down, but it's also got the Hollywood determination to play it safe. It's a well-made but conventional action adventure game that does nothing you haven't seen before.

Kena is a spirit guide who helps souls move on from the mortal plane. This means searching three areas for relics, clearing corruption, and defeating lesser unfriendly spirits on the way. Seeking out relics to gently move a soul on, I can understand, but repeatedly hitting them in the face with a stick? That seems rather unorthodox. Shows what I know.

Combat, of which there is a lot, works just fine, but I can't get any more enthusiastic about it than that.

There's a light attack, a heavy attack, a block, and parry, and other abilities to unlock (including a bow, which becomes vital both in combat, and for switches used in the light traversal puzzling). Although some enemies require specific tactics to defeat,

generally speaking it's all a bit button-bashy. It doesn't help that arenas tend to be fairly small, and enemies often approach from off-camera. I end up dodging a lot.

The little creatures that accompany you on your journey are known as the Rot, and good god they are adorable. You can sit down to admire or play with them whenever you like, but they also have practical uses. During fights, you charge up 'courage' which allows you to

send them to distract an enemy, help destroy an enemy spawn point, or activate an unlocked ability. Poking around off the main path will sometimes yield new little followers, which suits my playstyle well. And the Rot do make themselves useful

Poking around off the path will sometimes yield new little followers

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A game about saving souls by beating them into submission

EXPECT TO PAY
£32

DEVELOPER
Ember Lab

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GeForce GTX 1650, AMD Ryzen 5 3550H, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
emberlab.com

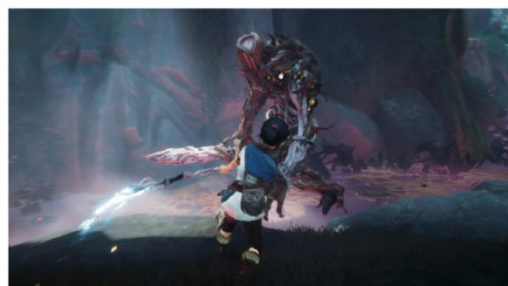
on occasion; one boss was frustrating me immensely, digging into the ground as soon as I got close, until I realised that I could order my adorable army to hold it in place for a few seconds while I got some hits in.

The Rot are also essential to progress while exploring the overworld. They're used to destroy areas of corruption blocking your way, and you can order them to throw switches or carry objects around. There are a few neat implementations of this but, generally, the potential here is agonisingly underexplored.

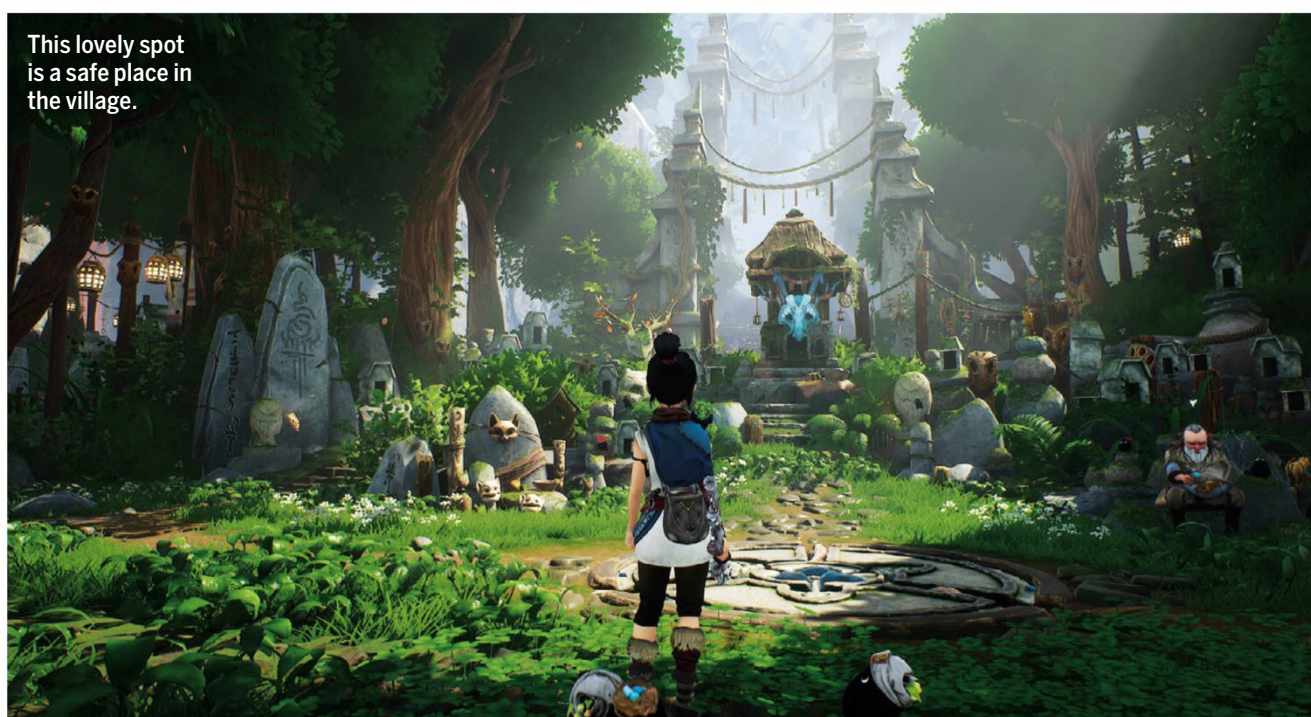
BOMBING IT

The sticky bomb mixes things up a little once you unlock it. It's useful in combat, but it's also used for some traversal puzzles. An explosion temporarily raises debris into the air, meaning you need to quickly jump from one chunk of masonry to another. Although you're not required to make the shots in mid-air, you're always on a strict time limit.

The fundamental issue with Kena, which rears its head almost everywhere you look, is that you'll have done almost everything on offer



TOP: Meditate at these meditation spots and it improves your health.

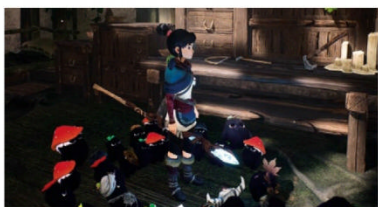


This lovely spot is a safe place in the village.

Glow and arrow.



ABOVE LEFT: The animation is lovely – but that only takes you so far.



ABOVE RIGHT: “Mum, mum, can we go to the park today?”

here a hundred times before. Combat is very familiar, complete with enemies carrying glowing weak spots. There are giant flowers which act as grapple points. There are targets to shoot within a time limit. The ledges you can grab on to are, as is tradition, marked with what I can only assume is bird poo. Strategic use of game design conventions isn’t inherently bad, but in no area does *Kena* reach beyond convention.

The story is another pretty conventional choice – a village and land ruined by a magical evil, spirits that need help leaving the mortal realm – but it does work. *Kena* doesn’t hurl its themes at you like a pie filled with sentimental life advice, which plenty of media is guilty of. Its comments on grief – and the terrible things people can do when driven by that dark engine – are nudged toward the player gently and easily identified as everyday truths.

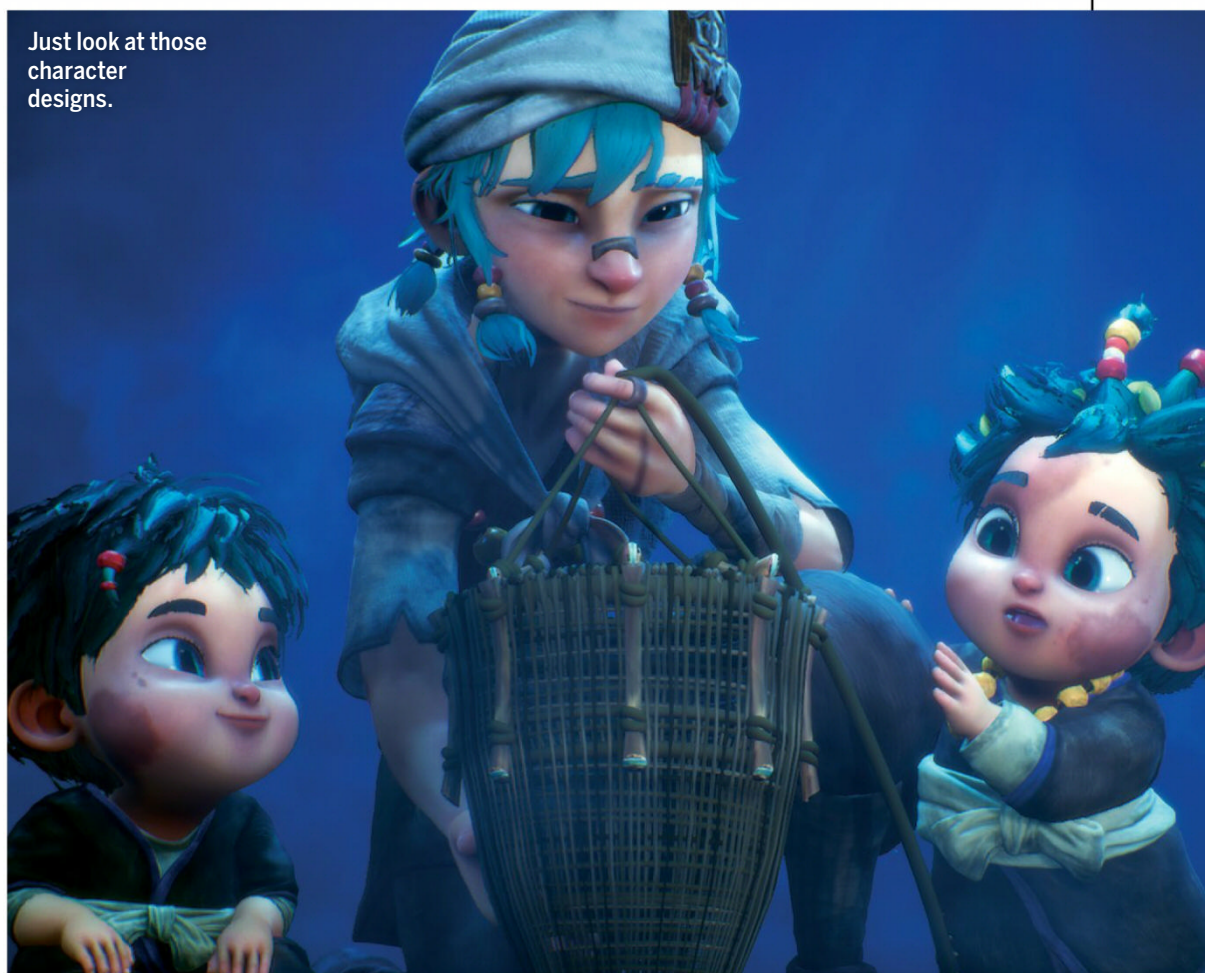
It answers one of the big questions, too, as *Kena* at one point crosses over to The Other Side while chasing a spirit. If you’re wondering what life after death is like, it seems that the answer is, surprisingly, ‘ever so slightly purple’.

PC GAMER VERDICT

It looks a lot better than it plays, thanks to by-the-numbers design, but its story is full of heart and soul.

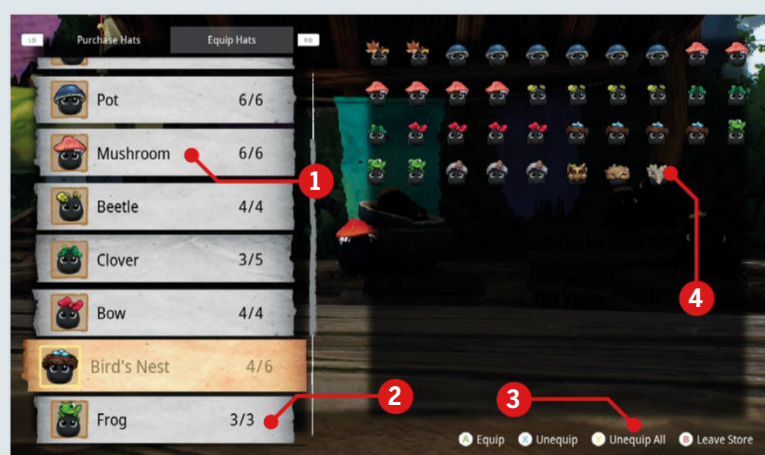
65

Just look at those character designs.



ROT TO WEAR

You can dress them up in masks and hats!



1 They can wear mushrooms as hats! Awwwww.

2 There’s a frog hat! A little exploring is needed for this one.

3 Make them all naked at the tap of a button. If you’re into that sort of thing.

4 You get a preview of how adorable they’ll look.

HELL AND BACK

DIABLO II: RESURRECTED is a proud love letter to one of the greatest RPGs of all time

By Luke Winkie

D*iablo II: Resurrected* moves at two speeds: You are either carving through swathes of undead with impunity, or you're navigating each fork in the road with taut reluctance, nursing the small puddle of red in the bottom left corner of the screen. Action-RPGs are a known quantity in 2021, so what I most appreciated about my return to Blizzard's classic was the way it made me fear the dark again, with no friendly checkpoints to save me.

Diablo II came out in 2000, and *Resurrected* represents the first new game in the franchise since the release of its sequel in 2012. The basics are all in place. You will take control of a lonely warrior – picked from one of seven different classes – who are condemned to wander Blizzard's arid, Old Testament wasteland. The game is divided into five different acts, each with their own hub that sprawls out into a procedurally generated universe. Step into the wilds and complete quests, plunder chests, and click zillions of cloven-hooved demons to death. *Diablo II* took over countless lives at the turn of the millennium, and it's still deeply compelling in 2021.

That's probably my favourite thing about *Diablo II: Resurrected*. The

modern games industry is frequently saddled with depressing, metatextual stat grinds, but this remaster is proud to be a dinosaur, and Blizzard has offered no monetary retrofitting

around the edges of *Diablo II* to bring it into the 21st century. In fact, every single change in *Resurrected* is whipsmart and exceedingly subtle. No longer will you be forced to create sad, brutish characters who

serve only as an inventory mule for your mains. The player stash is shared across the account, where weaponry passes unburdened between your Druid, Necromancer, Amazon, whatever. Tired of scraping up the piles of gold coins from the corpses in your wake? *Diablo II* adventurers soak those up automatically now, adding a faint

Lean back grandpa, and enjoy *Resurrected* with a gamepad

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A twitchy action-RPG at the gates of hell

EXPECT TO PAY
£34.99

DEVELOPER
Blizzard

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, GeForce GTX 1070, Intel Core i7-9700 CPU, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
1-8 players online

LINK
diablo2.blizzard.com/en-us

dash of idle-game efficiency to Sanctuary. Have the decades since high-school burdened you with back pain? Lean back grandpa, and enjoy *Resurrected* with a gamepad.

Blizzard has reupholstered much of their back-catalogue to varying degrees of success, (looking at you, *Warcraft III: Reforged*) but there is a tender attention to detail in this new version of *Diablo II* that exceeds what's available in those other efforts. At any moment, players can tap the G key to shift back into the original art and witness all of the airbrushing. I was often surprised at what I found. Streams of putrid water run through the sewers of Lut Gholein, and after a brief investigation, I found that they simply didn't exist in the game files back in 2000. It's amazing what is possible, when everything isn't rendered in 800 by 600.

INFERNAL AFFAIRS

And yet, despite all of those innovations, there's a voice deep within me that wishes *Resurrected* went a few steps further. I am a radical when it comes to my remasters, and I love and respect all of my hardcore *Diablo II* lifers who want their dungeon-crawl dipped in

CLASS DISMISSED *The official, objective, 100% correct ranking of the Diablo II classes*



1 AMAZON
When all else fails, the spear lady reigns supreme.



2 BARBARIAN
Perfect for playing *Diablo* like its an idle game.



3 DRUID
We've always appreciated his Paul Bunyan look.



4 NECROMANCER
Cool, but we're trying to leave our goth phase in 2000.



5 SORCERESS
Enjoy getting hard-stuck in Act II, you fool.



6 ASSASSIN
Skulking around in the shadows? Come on now.

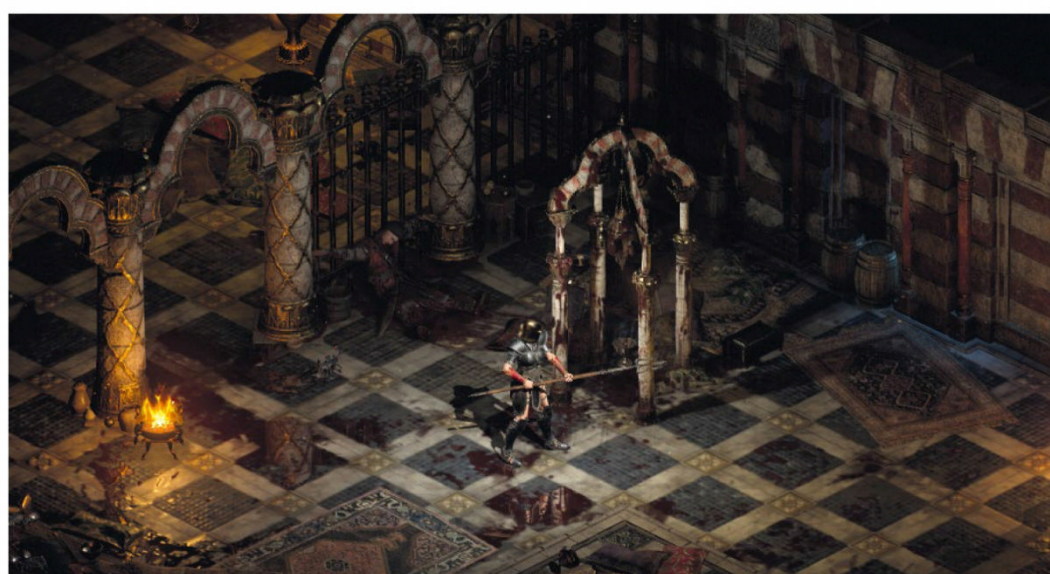


7 PALADIN
My man, this is *Diablo*. There is no salvation here.

Blizzard has done an incredible job with the lighting.

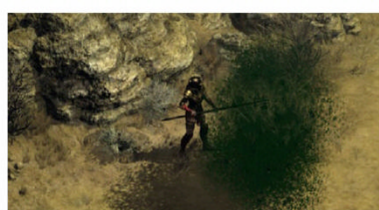
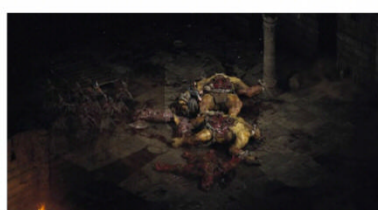


QUEST LOG
Arlene says: I can't carry anym



ABOVE: You won't find any rainbows here.

RIGHT: The gore has never looked better.



Through time and space, *Diablo* is eternal.



Now you know what I seek, Marius.

ABOVE: All of the cinematics have been remastered as well.

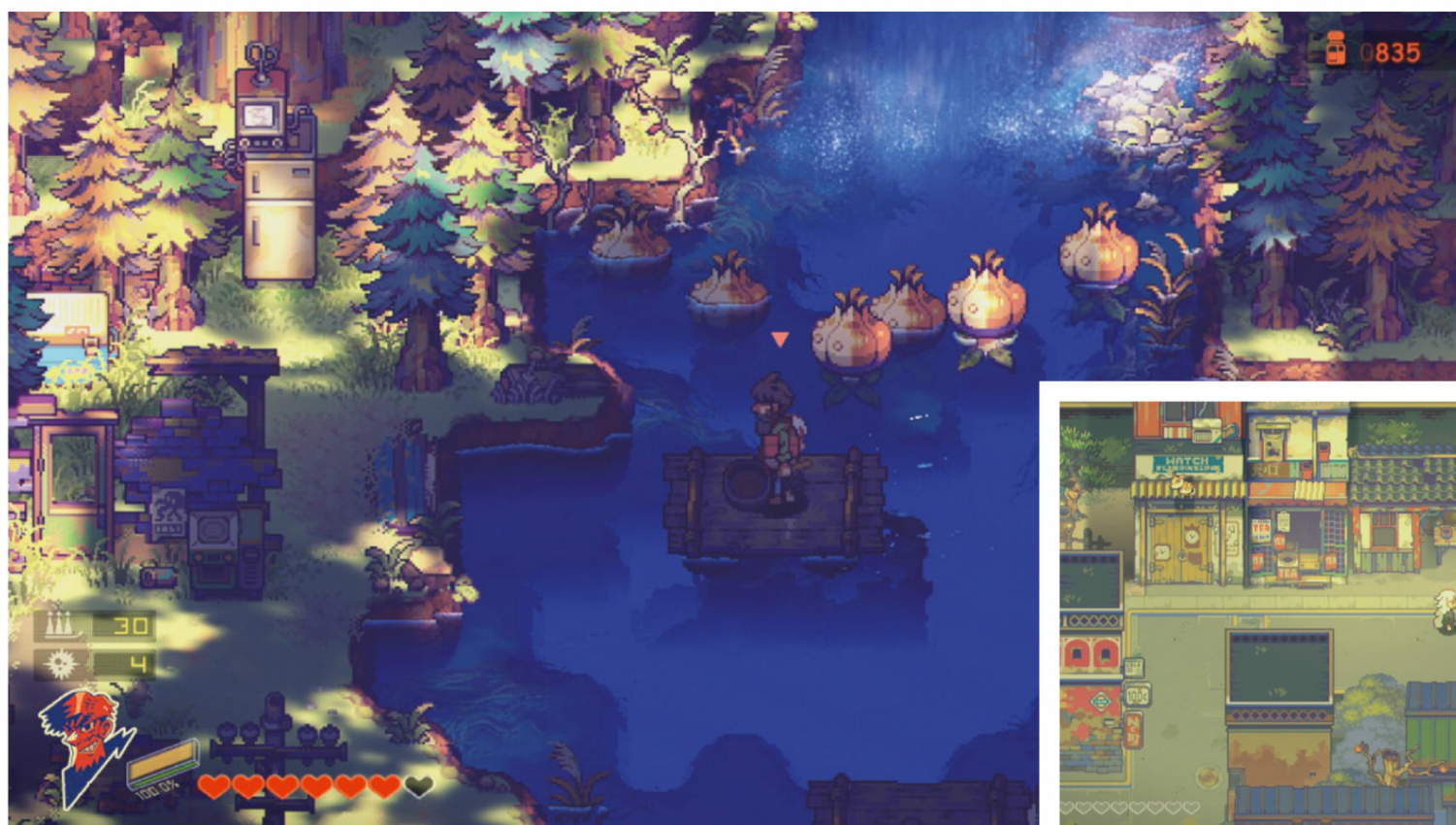
formaldehyde and capable of returning them to the exact spot where they last left their happiness. But still... does our inventory really need to be this small? Are the constant corpse runs, where we must pluck our displaced gear off our bodies, all that necessary? These are the questions of someone who is not a hardcore *Diablo II* head, and it is clear where *Resurrected's* allegiances lie. This is not a video game designed to inaugurate a fresh generation of Tristram survivors – that duty is surely left to the forthcoming *Diablo IV*. Instead, the players gathered here have all been playing *Diablo II* for

years, and now they have a prettier, smoother, and slightly less finicky version to enjoy. Is there a universe out there where *Diablo II* is reborn with a from-the-studs change of philosophy? Absolutely, but that brutally misses the point. This is a celebration of one of the greatest RPGs of all time; the revellers don't want you to ruin the mood. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

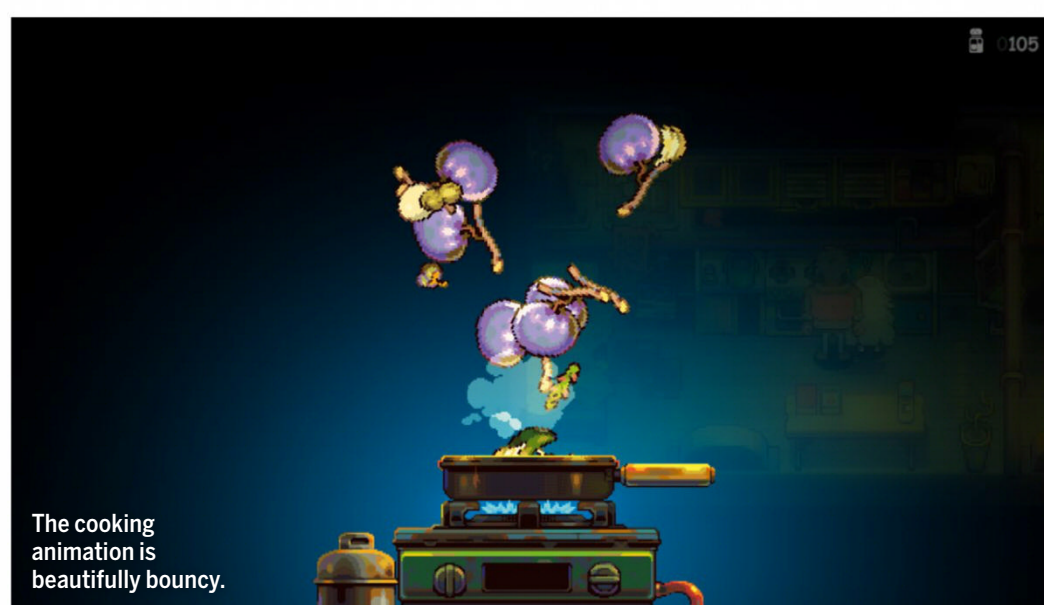
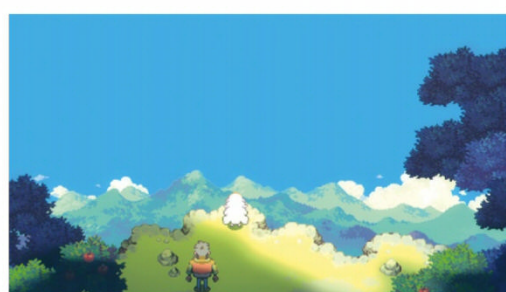
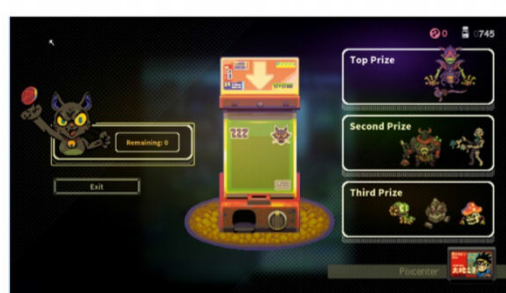
Diablo II: Resurrected combines a beautiful new look and some smart innovations to deliver a great take on a classic.

80



RIGHT: Not all of the enemies are cute – these zombies have got some seriously nasty innards.

BELOW RIGHT: The outside world is beautiful but deadly.



The cooking animation is beautifully bouncy.

A tribute to Ghibli director Hayao Miyazaki can be found in Potrock Isle.



A Talk

SPIRITED AWAY

EASTWARD's atmosphere outshines its uneven plot

By Daniella Lucas

Set in a world where humanity is clinging on in pockets of civilisation, *Eastward* follows the exploits of John – a silent miner who uses a frying pan for both cooking and hitting people – and Sam. They develop a father-daughter-like relationship as they eke out a living in the underground town of Potrock Isle, however they're soon exiled to the wastelands of the surface world after causing a bit too much trouble. And the world above isn't what it seems...

The game takes a lot of inspiration from retro RPGs and the likes of *Earthbound*, *Zelda*, and Studio Ghibli, and features a mix of puzzles and action-based combat across beautifully desolate locations. You'll explore the world via stops on a strange train track as you uncover the dark secrets plaguing this charming pixelated world. There are parallels to the train found in *Spirited Away*, but instead of just passing by various fantastical locations you get to stop at each station to explore.

The puzzles themselves are very *Zelda*-like – put weights on platforms to hold doors open, punt bombs across gaps, split up to clear paths for each character in turn – but strike a good balance between being challenging enough without being too frustrating. However some sections do start to feel a little repetitive, and one part in particular where you have to solve them at speed to avoid being consumed by a spreading miasma made me have to step away for a second to cool down. It's not that the puzzles are difficult, but there isn't enough time to assess and then complete them before dying. The tenseness of the moment felt ruined by repeated attempts to do puzzles quickly enough to survive – but thankfully moments like this are rare.

FUN GUYS

Combat is also a little fiddly. The world is filled with quirky enemies such as waddling mushrooms and bomb-spitting duck plants which

can usually be taken down with a few pan strikes, but bosses all have some kind of gimmick to solve first to coax them out of hiding or get them to stand still so you can give them a good pounding. John's pan has a satisfying thwack but can be hard to aim, and switching between that and your gun can slow you down. However swapping between John and Sam to make use of her

energy blasts is incredibly quick and helps keep things fresh.

Where *Eastward* really excels is in its atmosphere. It's utterly

The music has stuck with me even after I've stopped playing

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Action-based combat and a mix of puzzles.

EXPECT TO PAY
£22

DEVELOPER
Pixpil

PUBLISHER
Chucklefish

REVIEWED ON
Intel(R) Core(TM) i5-8250U CPU @ 1.60GHz 1.80 GHz, Intel® HD Graphics 620, 8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/977880/Eastward/

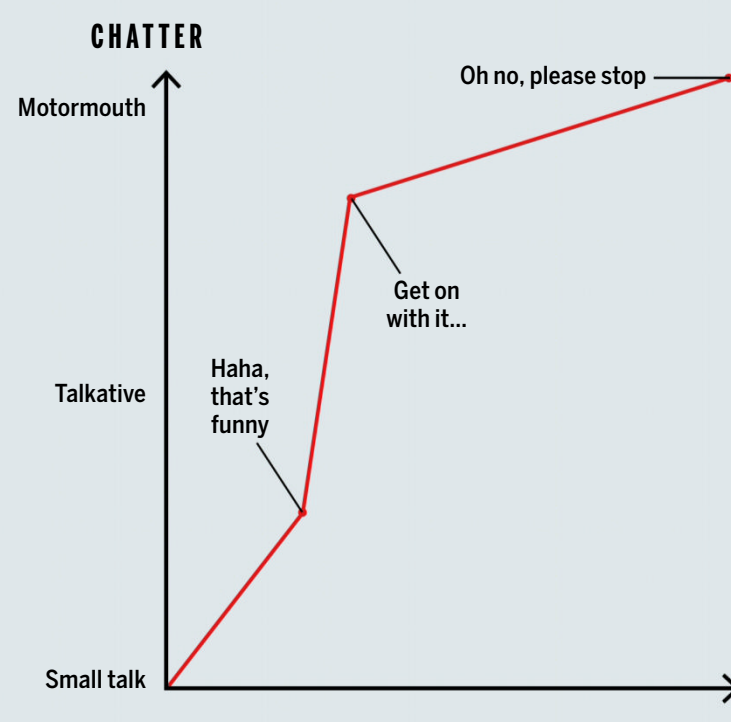
gorgeous, and somehow straddles that line of feeling both retro in its pixelated form, and modern with its detail and lighting. New Dam city is a highlight, with Japanese-style houses and alleyways all crowded together but still overflowing with potted plants and power lines. The music has stuck with me long after I've stopped playing, and Pixpil have done a great job with text. Speech bubbles shake with surprise or pip slowly during tense moments. It's a masterclass on giving characters personality without voice acting.

Eastward is also brimming with unique characters, be they part of the main cast or just NPCs going about their day. While this approach is commendable and everyone is written well, it does have its drawbacks. When everyone in the room is weird and kooky, no one really stands out. It feels like being hit with a constant wall of chatter where it's hard to tell what's really important because everything is given equal weight. It's also hard getting to really know certain characters early on only for them to never be mentioned again – as the story progresses it becomes harder to feel attached to anyone.

Each of *Eastward's* essential parts – its story, characters, action, and world – are well made and hold up well to scrutiny individually. But it doesn't quite manage to pull it together naturally. Its central mystery is utterly captivating at times, but struggles to keep up its initial momentum throughout. However the wider sense of atmosphere that Pixpil has created here is more than enough to keep you travelling and exploring, despite the unevenness of the experience. ■

ALL TALK

Is there such a thing as too much chat?



PC GAMER VERDICT

Eastward is worth playing for its craft and atmosphere, even if the journey has lows to go with its highs.

78

MYST TAKE

The classic puzzle game **MYST** gets a modern update – but still feels dated

By Chris Livingston

Myst was my first PC co-op game. In 1993 my friend Steve and I sat side-by-side in front of my boxy CRT peering in wonder at a game that looked unlike anything else ever made. We walked our way back and forth across beautiful and mysterious islands, hunting for pixels to interact with, making notes with pencil and paper, and bashing our brains against a series of ridiculously obtuse puzzles. We never finished.

It's a little weird to be back in *Myst* in 2021, after all this time. Cyan Worlds has completely remade the game (again, following *realMyst* and *realMyst: Masterpiece Edition*). And this new 3D *Myst* works on both desktop and in VR, so I got to spend time actually (virtually) walking around in it. As a remake, *Myst* is a faithful one, but maybe a bit too faithful. Cyan Worlds says it's a "reimagined" *Myst*, but while it's far more modern-looking it's still almost exactly the same game. *Myst*, no matter how it looks in 2021, feels pretty outdated.

In case you haven't had a chance to play one of the many versions of *Myst* in the past 28 years, the adventure game begins with you trapped on a strange island after reading a strange book. To gather the missing pages of the book and

discover the story of the island and the family who once inhabited it, players need to solve elaborate puzzles that transport them to new islands, and complete even more

puzzles to return.

It is nice to be able to actually walk through the world this time

It is nice to be able to actually walk through the world this time, and for a while it's novel experiencing a familiar place in a new way, wandering from puzzle to puzzle rather than just

clicking on static images when I want to move around. At the same time it highlights how even a freshly rebuilt game can still feel a bit out of date, because *Myst* is a lovely place, but it's not a big place. Everything on the islands is just a few steps away from everything else, and after playing countless games set on islands over the years, especially other puzzle games like *The Witness*, the world of *Myst* today just feels... small.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A 3D remake of *Myst* that supports desktop and VR

EXPECT TO PAY
£23.80

DEVELOPER
Cyan Worlds Inc

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i7-9700K, 16GB RAM, Oculus Quest with Link

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
cyan.com/games/myst

Puzzles are just the same as they were in the original, though you can randomise them if you want to play again with a new challenge. As they did in 1993, the puzzles can be fairly straightforward, punishingly difficult, or somewhere in between. There's still plenty of clever puzzle design. Sound often comes into play, which I really love, like a distant clunking sound while turning a wheel in a cabin or an underground train puzzle where sounds play at the track intersections and combine with one another to give you directions. Solving a puzzle, or even figuring out what the puzzle wants from you, results in plenty of happy eureka moments, not just from feeling smart but from having resisted the urge to cheat by looking up the answers.

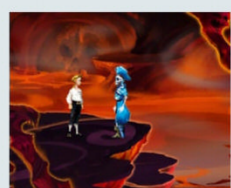
ISLAND LIVING

Even with this modern facelift, the world of *Myst* remains mostly static, and even in 3D it still feels more like a painting of a place than an actual place. And while a photomode has been added so you can take pictures of puzzle clues to use as reference, I still can't really imagine trying to solve the game in VR. There's no way taking pictures can replace using a pen and paper to scribble down notes, something that would be difficult to do while holding controllers and wearing a headset.

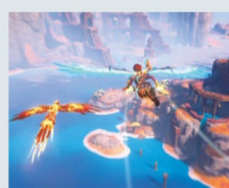
It's nice to revisit *Myst* after all these years, but even in the 3D the classic puzzle slideshow still feels like a series of pretty pictures to be looked at rather than a real location to visit. If you've got an itch to revisit *Myst*, this is the version I'd suggest trying, as long as you're not expecting something altogether different than the 1993 original. ■

BEST STRANDING

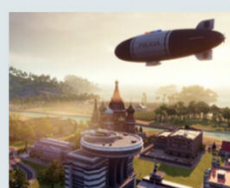
What videogame island would we like to be stranded on in real life?



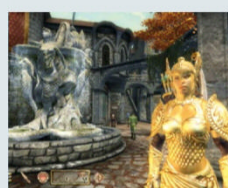
MONKEY ISLAND
MONKEY ISLAND SERIES
Plenty of grog. Non-lethal swordplay. Spitting contests and sea shanties. And we'd love to chill with Murray.



THE GOLDEN ISLE
IMMORTALS FENIX RISING
It's beautiful, fun to explore, and you can meet a whole bunch of different gods instead of just typical tourists.



TROPICO
TROPICO SERIES
Maybe it's not an ideal vacation spot, what with the Cold War, corruption, and capitalists. But at least you're in charge.



SHIVERING ISLES
TES: OBLIVION
Mania and Dementia aren't places we're that keen on visiting, but we'd risk it to hang out with Sheogorath. Dude's a real trip.



ROOK ISLANDS
FAR CRY 3
Loads of extreme sports on offer, like jetskiing, wingsuiting, and dodging murderous pirates. That'll get the adrenaline going.

PC GAMER VERDICT

This modern remake gives the classic game a lovely coat of paint, but doesn't stop it from feeling outdated.

68

It's still pretty as a painting.



Want to fly that rocket? Learn the piano.



God rays give you something to look at beside buttons and levers.



LEFT: Goofy FMV has been replaced by goofier CG faces.



BELOW LEFT: A feast for the eyes, but don't forget to use your ears.



I'm sensing a theme. Something to do with gears.



RESISTANCE IS FEUDAL

MEDIEVAL DYNASTY makes doing chores for everyone else fun

By Jason Coles

Having put the finishing touches on the fourth building in my little village-to-be, I realise I need to go out hunting to get more food for the few denizens that dwell within it. It's my job to look after them, after all, and that means building shelter and services, but also going out to hunt some bison or deer for meat. I feel pretty confident as I head out... but end up dying to a boar taking a bite out of my ankle.

This moment helped give me the respect I needed for the world of *Medieval Dynasty*, because while it looks tame and feels like an RPG a lot of the time, it still has the heart of a survival game.

Progressing means learning to balance the gentler and harsher aspects of the game.

Things can get a little odd where the two meet. You gain levels in the different skillsets, for example, by doing those activities over and over – in theory encouraging you to go out into the world and try out the skills you want to master. In practice you end up with a lot of spoons.

Remember the similar system in *Skyrim*? Where you ended up grinding up your blacksmithing skills by filling your bags with a ridiculous number of daggers? Basically imagine that, but instead of working towards magic swords, you just want to make a shovel, and instead of forging

daggers you're whittling spoons out of sticks. On the other hand, it was genuinely really exciting once I did get the shovel. Now I can dig up the stump after I cut down a tree!

This game isn't just about keeping yourself alive though. It's called *Medieval Dynasty* for a reason. You need to start your own little town, and keep building it up from being a single house for you to sleep in to a

bustling rural metropolis full of people with different jobs that you have to keep fed, watered and warm.

Assigning jobs means they'll help out with resource gathering and stuff as well, but you're the one in charge. I assume this is what it's like to be a manager – or at least what it would be like if along with assigning work you also had to give your employees the ingredients to cook their dinner, and firewood for their cosy home that you built with your own hands.

Progressing means learning to balance the gentler and harsher aspects

HOG WILD

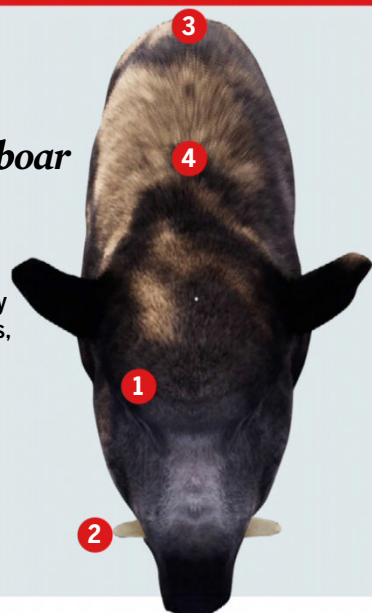
The anatomy of a Medieval Dynasty boar

1 HATE-FILLED EYES

You may not remember the sins of your past, but every boar in *Medieval Dynasty* does, and they want you to suffer.

2 HOMING PAIN TUSKS

These things will hit you so hard your entire dynasty will suffer for it.



3 REAR END

It smells bad, and in about 12 hours time it's going to poop out your digested remains.

4 CUTE, FLUFFY BACK

It's easy to get distracted by the fact that these furry pigs are, well, furry pigs, but touch this and you will know only pain.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A medieval survival RPG management sim

EXPECT TO PAY

£27

DEVELOPER

Render Cube

PUBLISHER

Toplitz Productions

REVIEWED ON

GTx 1070 Dual OC, Windows 10, Intel Core i5-7600k, 16gb Ram

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

toplitz-productions.com

HARD TIMES

Medieval Dynasty has some pretty comprehensive difficulty sliders that allow you to do things like remove temperature as a concern entirely, or massively reduce or increase the amount of food people need to live. You can even stop bandit attacks if you want to live in a world where people are nice all the time, or make seasons as long or as short as you want. It's a surprisingly accessible approach, and the ability to remove and alter so many things means you can either play this as a brutally difficult game where you're constantly against the clock, or turn it into a casual chillout session akin to a grittier *Animal Crossing*.

But even with things set to be a little more brutal, *Medieval Dynasty* still feels as though it's been designed as a second life, rather than a fantasy one. You're meant to go about your tasks and keep everyone happy and safe, rather than building up to trying to slay dragons or visit other worlds. It's really quite relaxing. Less relaxing, though, is the fact that the game doesn't always do a great job of teaching you things, and there's an awful lot to learn here. You'll often have to consult the in-game 'Knowledge' tab to be able to learn what you're meant to be doing.

Medieval Dynasty isn't necessarily the most exciting game out there, but it's comforting. It's the kind of thing you can jump into for an hour or so a night and see your progress in the form of a new building, or a brand-new member of your very own village. Or jump in expecting a quick visit and find yourself losing four hours to it, emerging from a trance with a warm fuzzy feeling in your stomach. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Medieval Dynasty is a fun and relaxing survival game/RPG, but it can lack a little bit for exciting moments.

74

Screenshots taken roughly two minutes before disaster.



Pretty impressive with a stone axe.



LEFT: A special vision mode helps you see resources, like a smelly Batman.

FAR LEFT: Your village grows as fast as your hands can move.

BELOW LEFT: Why hoard gold and diamonds when you can have spoons?



If we live next to a waterfall, why does everyone in my village smell so bad?

Thrust
Aim
Unequip
Torch
Wooden Spear

GAME OVER

GAMEDEC is a cybersleuth RPG that wastes its great premise

By Fraser Brown

In the days before the ubiquity of the internet, stumped gamers would sometimes phone a tip line for a bit of life-saving advice. Nintendo's 'game counsellors' in particular had a near-mythical status, and a gig that every kid dreamed of having. The reality was less impressive, less glamorous, but the idealised version – encyclopaedic knowledge of games, completed *Battletoads* blindfolded – lives on in *Gamedec*, where they serve as fixers in virtual worlds.

The childhood fantasies that most RPGs trade in are long established, but *Gamedec*'s setup is a more modern brand of wish fulfilment. As one of the titular gamedecs, you're a gamer who is just so good at games that you can hop between virtual worlds fixing problems and solving crimes. It's silly, but also grounded, creating a web of themes that feel much more relevant than any demonic invasion.

Though you can only play as a gamedec, you've got a life beyond the gig, other professions, opening up new options that can break a case. These are your skills. As an infotainer, I use my fame and inauthentic charm to impress fans, making them easier to interrogate. Infotainers have other tricks, too, and expert knowledge that

comes in handy in a surprising number of situations.

It's an intuitive system where the way you roleplay is reflected in the skills you're able to acquire, but there's a lack of consistency. You've got four personality types made up of eight themed aspects, and it's by making decisions that increase them that you get new points for your professions. I've noticed several occasions where aspects go up for seemingly unrelated actions, however, while all the times I've selected the most chill options have done nothing to increase my calm stat.

This is a bit of a problem for a game touting its extreme reactivity. A lot of the time it reacts in ways that make sense, but it sometimes

It struggles to hold all the disparate threads together

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cyberpunk RPG where you're a gamer detective

EXPECT TO PAY
£26

DEVELOPER
Anshar Studios

PUBLISHER
Anshar Publishing

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080 Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
gamedec.com

struggles to hold all the disparate threads together. This culminates in other oddities, like characters responding to you as if you'd said something entirely different, or responses that are missing entirely.

ON THE CASE

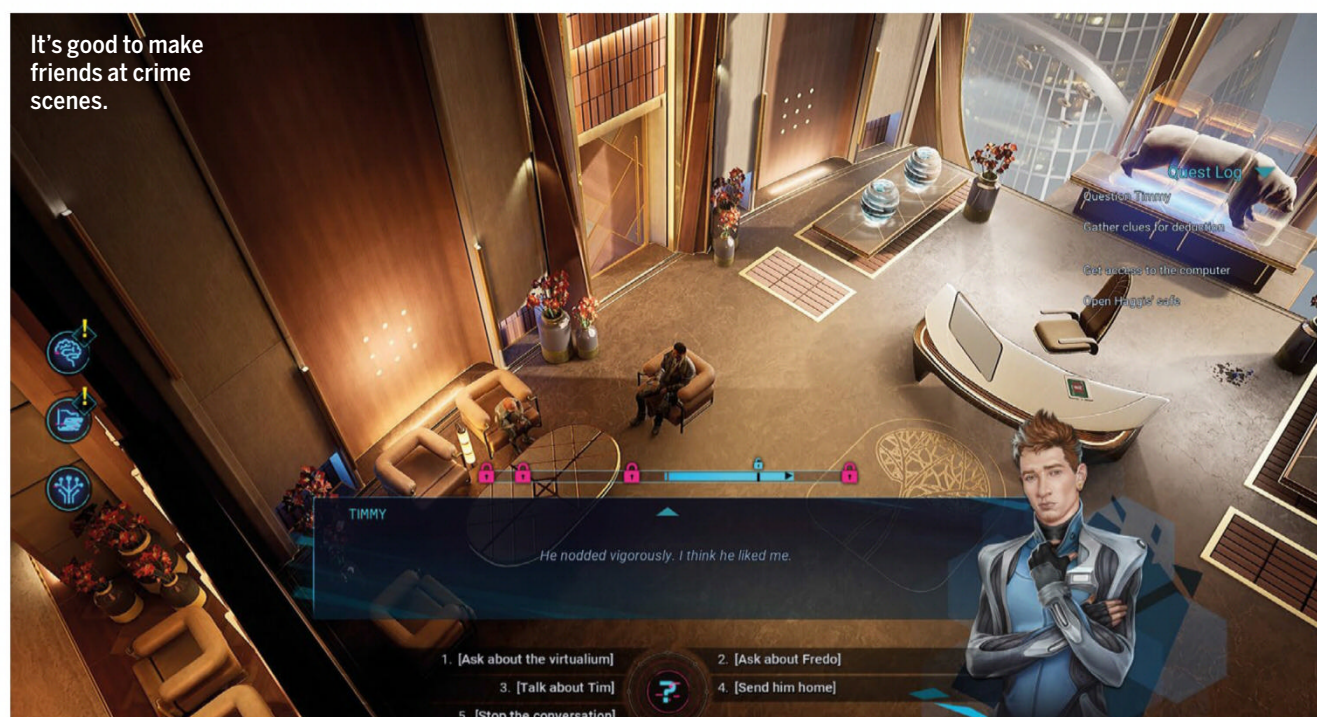
Gamedec's cases are a lot more unusual than your typical RPG fare. A missing person stuck in a digital world built on fetishes, a group of virtual farmers being exploited in a free-to-play game, an MMO clan that's grown into a huge cult – they all use elements of conventional mysteries and then take them to unexpected places, skewering things like game monetisation.

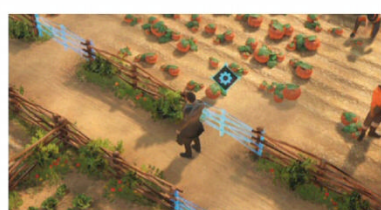
By exploring these virtual realms and doing your detective thing you'll uncover clues that will lead to a variety of possible deductions. It's not possible to find every clue, but it's also impossible to get stuck. If you aren't able to solve one part of the mystery, you'll still have skills that will let you solve other parts.

The cases are unfortunately accompanied by writing that never finds its groove. For every bit of confident prose there are paragraphs

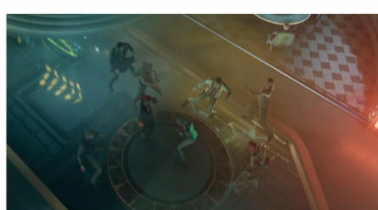


ABOVE: Every hard-drinking gamedec needs a loyal servobot to help them out.





ABOVE LEFT: Harvest Time is a F2P farming sim with a seedy underbelly.



ABOVE RIGHT: Gamedec is not the best dancers, but they try.

full of typos and stilted dialogue. I wish it had more to say, too, but it just skims the surface of its issues, and those themes are subsumed by a conventional sci-fi plot.

You're bombarded with choices, but it feels like you're only reacting to obstacles the game throws in your way, rather than getting into some engaging freeform investigations. And then you're yanked to the next bit. Given how brief it is compared to most RPGs, the change in pace and focus is even more jarring.

It didn't help that bugs required me to play through several sections again. There are broken quests, conversations that trap you in a dialogue box forever, animations that leave you stuck in mid-air, and characters you can't interact with but are still told to interrogate. The English translation also leaves a lot to be desired, and at the time of writing remains incomplete.

Gamedec had heaps of promise, but the bugs, inconsistencies and that jarring pivot leave it feeling rushed and confused. And it's all the more disappointing because it's so obvious that there's a great game in here – it just didn't get finished. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Gamedec is half of a good RPG, but unfortunately falls far short of its very tantalising premise.

58



PROFESSIONAL HELP

The professions you can pick straight away



SCALPEL

Your medical skills make you great at interrogating docs and using medical equipment.



INFOTAINER

Your charisma can charm answers out of people, and you can boast about your follower count.



SLEEVES

You're a dickhead, which comes in handy when you want to intimidate someone.



GLAZIER

Hack real and virtual tech to crack cases, tweak developer stacks, or just tell an ad drone to piss off.



HIT AND MYTH

PATHFINDER: WRATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS is so dense it's got its own gravity

By Jody Macgregor

The first boss in *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous* is character creation. It's as daunting as any multi-limbed demon. There are 25 classes, most subdivided into six archetypes. There are prestige classes you can't choose until later, which show up here if you want to plan your build around one. You choose a race, heritage, background, religion, skills, feats, maybe an animal companion, which gets its own class, skills and feats.

At the end of this process you may well end up with a character who is completely inappropriate for getting what you want out of *Wrath of the Righteous* and, several hours later, want to restart or respec. Maybe they're too weak for the challenge of Core difficulty if you're keen enough to bother with that, maybe they double up with an early companion and feel superfluous, maybe they have an ability that doesn't work the way you thought and kind of suck. Compared to this, fighting some big water elemental or shadow demon seems easy.

MATH OF THE RIGHTEOUS

Your character, whether a rage-powered bloodrider with a pet smilodon, a halfling knight who charges into battle on a dog, or just an elf who is a wizard – that's cool

too – is off to join a crusade against the demons of the Worldwound. These demons marched through a hole in reality years ago and have been making a mess of the place ever since. Eventually, you'll become the crusade's commander and a mythic hero with incredible powers.

You'll become the crusade's commander and a mythic hero

This happens in an isometric RPG that evokes *Baldur's Gate* so much sometimes I walk under a patch of autumn leaves and think I'm back on the Sword Coast. If you played *Pathfinder: Kingmaker* you'll be familiar with the effect, though this isn't a sequel to *Kingmaker* and is in fact a better introduction to the *Pathfinder* rules. Owlcat Games has learned that tutorial pop-ups are good and boxes of text will warn if you equip items with bonuses that don't stack or goof up the rules of the tabletop RPG it's based on.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An ambitious CRPG that follows the zero-to-hero formula then keeps going

EXPECT TO PAY
£43

DEVELOPER
Owlcat Games

PUBLISHER
Meta Publishing

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
No

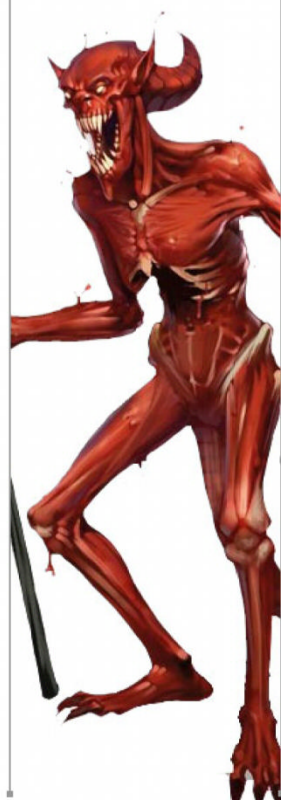
LINK
wrath.owlcatgames.com

Better tutorials make combat's flow of numbers a bit easier to keep up with, though it could be presented better. (I will go to the grave not understanding why it shows the unmodified results of dice rolls next to the difficulty target they have to beat, rather than showing the modified number that actually gets compared to the difficulty.) Another thing that smooths out combat is the option to switch between turn-based and real-time-with-pause mode, even mid-fight. You can go turn by turn when tackling bosses, or taking out the alchemists trying to burn down your local pub by throwing firebombs at it, then switch to RTWP when you're mopping up cultists or other filler. (There's a lot of filler.)

MIGHT & TRAGIC

While those pop-ups are eager to help with combat and levelling, they thin out once you're handed whole armies to manage. In an underexplained side game, your crusaders fight on a grid while their oversized general looks on from the left and occasionally casts a spell, like that one person in every group project who acts like they're contributing but isn't really pulling their weight, throwing some glitter across the poster board while the actual soldiers fight and die.

This strategy layer is a significant and demanding timesink. You have to chip away at units representing hundreds of troops for turn after turn, long after it's obvious you've won. Once I figured out the best tactics – ignoring opportunities to collect handfuls of useless specialists who just clutter the map in favour of building doomstack units of high-damage troops several hundred deep, then camping archers in the corner surrounded by knights – it stopped being such a hassle. It even became a pleasant change of pace, a fine if slight imitation of *Heroes of Might & Magic*. Maybe the mediocrity of the last two actual



PATHS TO ADVENTURE

Other Pathfinder campaigns that could make fun videogames



SKULL & SHACKLES

Become captain of a pirate ship, win a regatta, build a fleet, claim the throne of the Pirate King.



HELL'S REBELS

Join an uprising against a tyrant, forge alliances with other free peoples, defeat the inquisition.



COUNCIL OF THIEVES

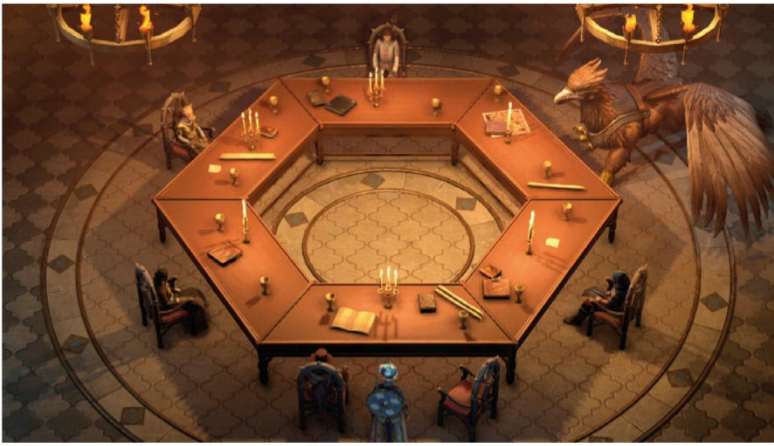
Rob a decadent city's paranoid rulers, survive a deadly feast, and perform an even deadlier play.



REIGN OF WINTER

Steal Baba Yaga's hut, travel through time and space in it, arrive on Earth, and fight Rasputin.

A zombie bear, how tough can it be? Turns out, very.



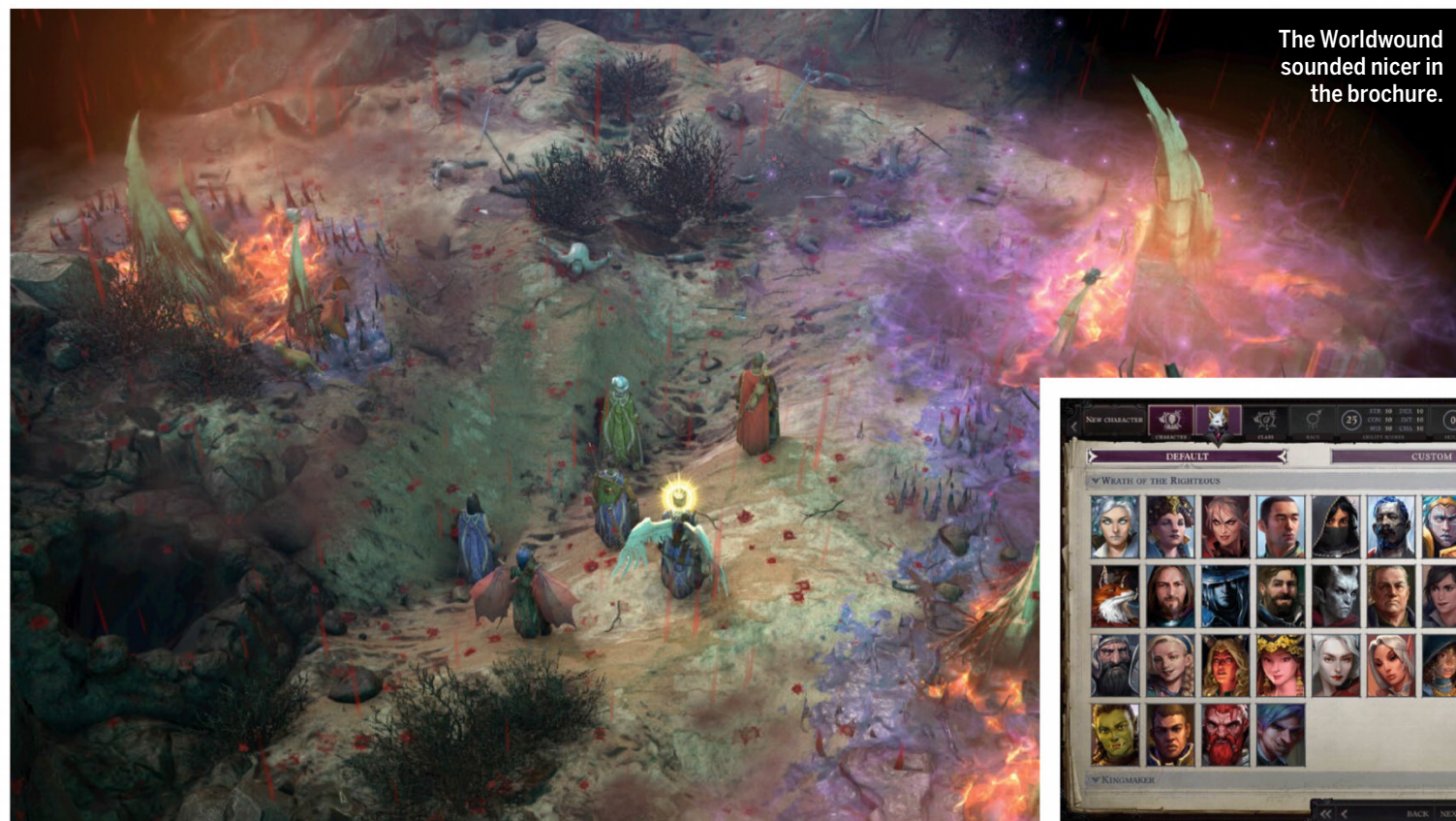
FAR LEFT: "Anybody else a Slayer fan? Just me?"

LEFT: Floor-tile puzzles can go to hell.

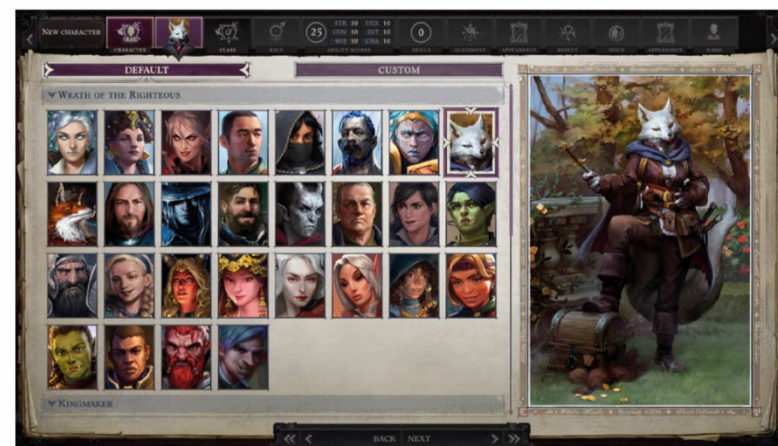


Ye olde tavern probably doesn't do nachos.

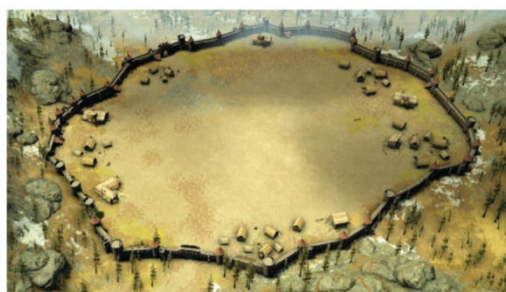




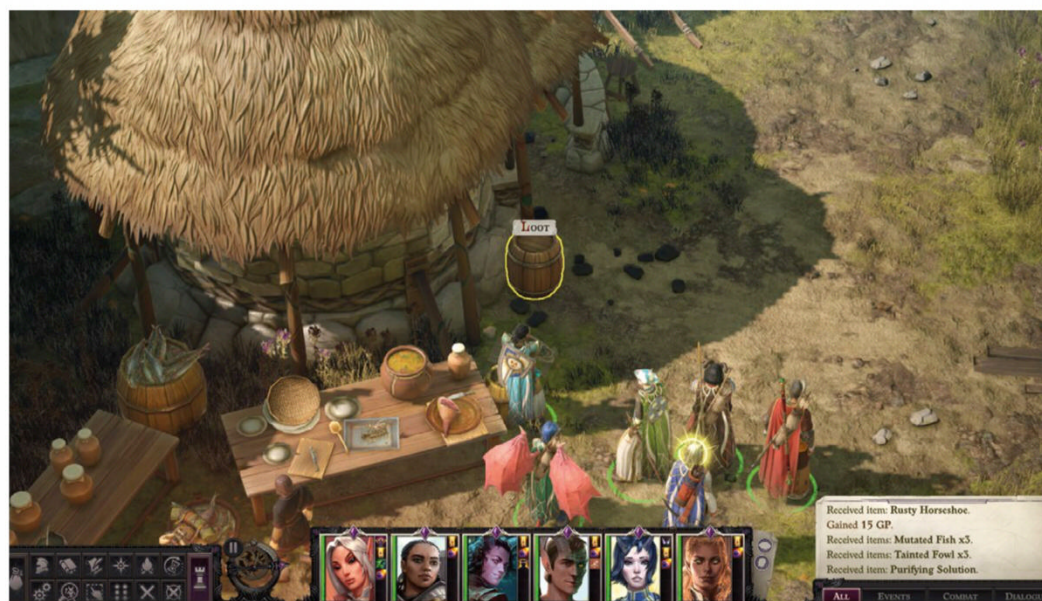
The Worldwound sounded nicer in the brochure.



RIGHT: I was surprised to see *Kingmaker*'s unpopular city-building return.



FAR RIGHT: Commander of a crusade, looter of barrels.



The lord of locusts spends a lot of time at the gym.



» HoM&M games has lowered my standards a bit.

As well as managing the crusade, you end up governing several regions of the map in a version of the kingdom management system from *Kingmaker*. It doesn't have that game's constant flow of disasters to deal with, though, and the buildings you plonk down in settlements are more useful, which is a definite improvement. In *Kingmaker*, most of them felt like traps for new players to waste resources on. Another improvement is that when you're deciding which decree to pass, whether throwing a parade to raise morale or sacrificing a few hundred soldiers in a magical experiment, the results are spelled out explicitly. You won't fall down one of those game-ending death spirals that the opaqueness of *Kingmaker* led to.

These management systems are the bread in a sandwich with your actual adventuring in its middle, and that adventuring is tasty. Sidequests have surprising outcomes, and the main storyline takes you to besieged cities, wastelands where it rains blood, and even the Abyss itself, which is like Hell's older brother who is even more into heavy metal. You may be a crusader, but you're also a spy who goes undercover in another dimension, as well as a mayor with council meetings to attend.

I suspect each companion will be someone's favourite, whether they prefer the ones who subvert stereotypes (a paladin who loves drinking and chill hangs, a pragmatic victory-at-any-cost hellknight who is also a gnome), or the ones so exaggerated they came straight from anime central casting (a witch-girl whose pure innocence makes cultists change their ways, a wizard who treats people like experiments).

The dialogue frequently references the choices you made in character creation, even which god you follow, and the companions chip in with their thoughts as you decide who to side with and whether to be a jerk or not. It's uneven though, going from paragraphs of evocative demonic grotesquerie and twisty pick-a-path storybook sequences to NPCs blandly spitting up long backstories, with the occasional sentence that reads like it was

mangled by Google translate. And all that dynamic dialogue makes moments that lack specificity stick out. In a sidequest involving elven politics full of bespoke references to my character also being an elf, an unavoidable dialogue option had me call an NPC 'elf' in a way every bit as artificial as if I called you 'human'.

Meanwhile, incognito in a demon city, I was labelled a 'mystery knight' even though I was an extravagant bard in a domino mask and colourful hat. That kind of stuff happens just often enough to be distracting.

The main storyline takes you to besieged cities and even the Abyss itself

DID YOU MYTH ME?

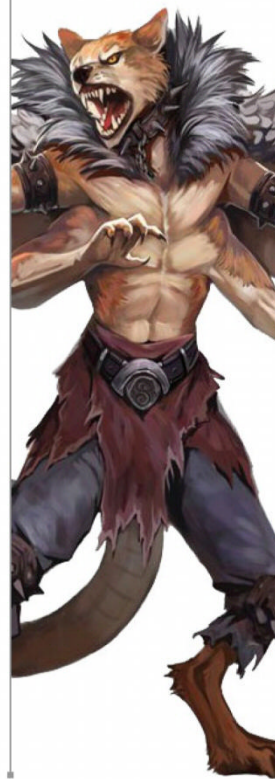
The mythic paths are uneven too. These routes to demigodhood are sprinkled throughout *Wrath of the Righteous*, and when you choose one it bolts another layer of levelling on top of the complicated character you've made. These can turn you into anything from a demon to an avatar of law who is basically a time-travelling Judge Dredd, and you eventually get an option to switch to another mythic path if you want to try more. Some are tightly integrated with the rest of the game, like the angel path, where others feel like afterthoughts. The trickster's whole deal is handing out lame 'ironic' punishments at the end of quests, a deflating string of jokes that aren't funny, while the lich's core ability to

raise dead soldiers is so underpowered it actually makes crusade mode harder.

Then there are the bugs. While I didn't hit many in the early chapters, later on they were frequent. Characters got stuck on the wrong side of doors when combat started, the whole party was teleported into the ground or walls, I had to reload an old save because a moveable bridge stopped moving and left me stranded. Mounted combat seems entirely broken, and whether a charge works at all is 50/50. To get past a black screen that showed up every time I killed a specific character I had to switch to windowed mode, but even that didn't help with a consistent crash at the end of the final dialogue. (I still haven't seen the outro, after replaying the ending four different ways to try to get around the issue.) All this is nothing compared to how buggy *Kingmaker* was at launch, but it's frustrating to see problems mount after relatively smooth early chapters.

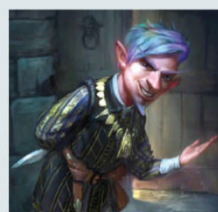
Wrath of the Righteous runs better than *Kingmaker* though, and saving and loading are both much faster. But my framerate dropped in big cities, and turning down the shadows and SSAO only partially improved things. For some reason the framerate took a dive when enemies died too, which made the end of every fight a lurch.

After some more patching though, *Wrath of the Righteous* will be well worth your time. This is a huge game, easily 100+ hours, in which you take a meticulously crafted hero, throw them into a meatgrinder of war, politics, and interplanar travel, and see how they're reshaped by it. After the most complicated character creation system I can think of, it tricks you into thinking you're done when in fact the entire game is about making a character. That size is both its strength and weakness, because it's got room for half-baked areas of story and systems that feel like you've wandered off into unmapped wilderness. But when you find the right path and are solving the world's problems while jogging across fields with your gang of colourful pals, it's like *Baldur's Gate II* never ended. ■



CLASSY CHOICES

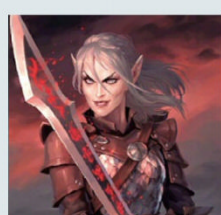
Archetypes that power up regular classes



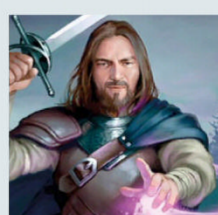
ALCHEMIST
VIVISECTIONIST
Drinks mutagens to increase stats, can sneak attack.



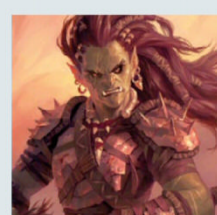
MONK
SCALED FIST
The higher their charisma, the harder they are to hit.



CAVALIER
GENDARME
Gets a free horse, charges for bonus damage.



MAGUS
SWORD SAINT
Masters a weapon like a fighter, buffs like a wizard.



BLOODRAGER
BLOODRIDER
Half barbarian, half sorcerer, rides a sabre-toothed tiger.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous is a long game of choose-your-own-chosen-one with highs to balance the lows.

76

DIE HARD

In city builder **DICE LEGACY**, you win or you die

By Tom Sykes

Don't let *Dice Legacy* deceive you, as it did me. It's not a chill city builder, with a couple of quirky features and nascent roguelike elements. No, it's a pitched battle for survival, pitting your dicey tribe against the winter and, eventually, a rival settlement. You're not (just) building a cute medieval town by plonking dice down on a dizzying ringworld planet – you're building a machine to take your enemies, The Others, down.

You'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise, given how sedately *Dice Legacy* starts. Parking your ship by a curved landmass, you soon go about the usual colony stuff: building a house and assigning workers to essential tasks. Food needs to be hunted, wood gathered and so on. But here your people are represented by colourful dice.

Exploiting the land involves matching die faces to the various icons in the environment. The Tool icon is found by forests, mines, meadows, and hunting lodges, and extraction is as simple as dropping a die with the same icon atop each resource. When the timer runs out, the die becomes exhausted, requiring a re-roll before it can be used again.

The tension at the heart of *Dice Legacy* is that its dice have durability. This is lowered every time you roll and they, er, die if it ever drops below zero. You're forever weighing the need to re-roll against the need to preserve durability, which can only be restored by plopping a die in the cookhouse with a bit of food.

But there are other hazards too. Dice can be wounded and killed in combat, or stricken with an infectious plague. And, when winter rolls around, they can be frozen, rendering them useless until you heal them, or the season ends.

ON A ROLL

These dice aren't just for show; *Dice Legacy* has stretched the genre to fit its peculiar premise. It's the unusual city builder where you only ever need

one house, for example. Moreover, it's used entirely for procreation. Yes, you put two dice in the house and three dice come tumbling out of the door.

While die rolls will always be random, you can 'empower' die faces to make them more effective when they do appear. You can also fuse dice together, although your population isn't terribly keen on being experimented on.

Joining the initial peasant class are the citizen, soldier, merchant, and monk classes, each fulfilling different roles and capable of rioting if not

After two frustrating attempts, I turned the difficulty down

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A quirky city builder that's secretly a merciless real-time strategy game

EXPECT TO PAY
£16

DEVELOPER
DESTINYbit

PUBLISHER
Ravenscourt, Maple Whispering Limited

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
dicelegacy.com

kept happy. It's a lot to take in, but you don't have to engage with some of these dice types and buildings if you don't want to.

What you *will* have to do is fight the city of aggressive settlers on the other side of the ringworld, who gradually make their presence known as you build your town. The only way to stop their increasingly powerful raids on your buildings is to smash the heart of their city to smithereens.

It's easy enough to reach said city – it's simply a matter of expanding upwards, in what is ultimately a compact map – but keeping hold of your territory is another matter.

After two frustrating attempts, I turned the difficulty down and started again. Here, The Others won't attack until you poke them first, giving you plenty of time to prepare. When I finally made my attack, the enemy responded with their initial, puny raiders, so it was a short and shaming victory in my favour.

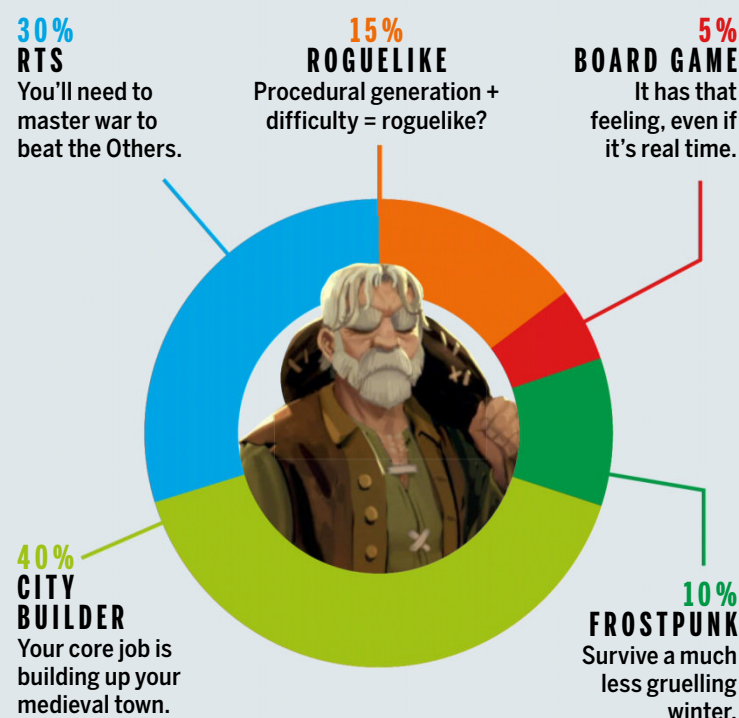
That's probably not the intended *Dice Legacy* experience, but I needed to see the end of it, partly to know what the many locked modes had to offer. There's no Others-free mode, but if you want to make the experience even harder you can play in a permanent winter, or on a map with fewer resources.

There's always been some overlap between city builders and real-time strategy games, but *Dice Legacy* carves an awkward niche in the middle. Yes, it's a game about building a colony, but your every effort should be directed towards overcoming its cliff-like final battle.

I admire it for that focus, even after hunching over my keyboard playing one of the most dispiriting games of my life. ■

DICE TRAY

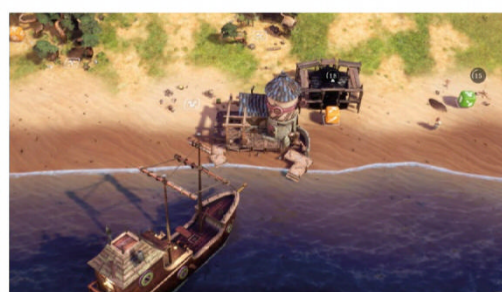
How many genres does one game need?



PC GAMER VERDICT

Dice Legacy is a smart and peculiar city builder that ends in a gruelling uphill battle against a tough rival city.

70



ABOVE: You can 'ascend' dice, and use them in future games.

FAR LEFT: Resources are plentiful, but finite.

LEFT: You begin the game on this tranquil shore.



Frozen dice are a pain. Thaw them out with ale.

MOEBIUS TRIP

Embarking on **SABLE**'s introspective open-world odyssey

By Nat Clayton

Every part of my bike tells a story. Stabilisers powered by crystals foraged from a storm-swept plateau; the hood a slick piece of kit picked up in the markets at Eccria; a pristine, ancient engine scavenged from a spaceship older than history. It handles like a dream, but it's also a living record – one I can imagine my Sable looking at fondly even when her adventures are a distant memory, and a thick layer of dust covers the old bike's chassis.

A stunning debut work from developer Shedworks, *Sable* is an open-world RPG styled heavily after *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. In fact, *Sable* carries a lot of *Zelda*'s influence – from the stamina bar and free-climbing, to a passing similarity in musical cues. But Shedworks has pointedly rejected combat in its entirety, with a story that ignores traditional fantasy adventure. *Sable* isn't here to save the world. She's just having the gap year of a lifetime.

Among the people of Midden, there's a rite of passage known as the Gliding. Leaving home and family behind, adolescents head out into the world to take time for themselves, figure out what they want to be, literally trying on new faces in the form of masks before

returning home to live out their new-found role in society. As *Sable* approaches her Gliding, this ritual provides the blueprint for the rest of the game, as you travel across the

deserts doing odd-jobs for strangers and earning badges to turn into new masks.

An hour-long tutorial with your clan, the Ibexii, you're given the two most essential pieces of kit for your travels: a Gliding stone

which, once activated, lets you float near-indefinitely in a protective bubble (though there's no fall damage penalty for hurling yourself off cliffs), and your bike, which you assemble from scavenged parts across the valley. Returning from the ceremony to obtain your mask, you find your clan of nomads has moved on – leaving just you and your bike facing a huge, open desert.

You travel across the deserts doing odd-jobs and earning badges

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A light RPG adventure set in a Moebius-inspired open world

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Raw Fury

PUBLISHER
Shedworks

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia RTX 2070, 16GB RAM, AMD Ryzen 5 3600

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
shed-works.co.uk/sable

Midden's desert regions are vast and largely empty, leaving you alone with the hum of your bike and the desert wind. Fittingly, your bike glides more than it revs, lighter even than *Destiny*'s sparrows. There's a soft purring to the engine as you float over dunes, creaking as you bump against rocks. It's often awkward, but never a nuisance – a somewhat inelegant companion that has a playfulness reminiscent of *Halo*'s bouncing jeeps.

That bike is your life, and it even feels a little alive itself. *Sable* whistles to switch it between a straightforward driving mode and strafing (which lets you move freely, albeit slowly, in all directions), and can even call it over like a horse – leaping onto its back as it glides towards her. Midden isn't of the same overwhelming scale as *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*'s Hyrule, but its deserts are far too vast to traverse on foot. Your bike makes those distances not only manageable, but joyous.

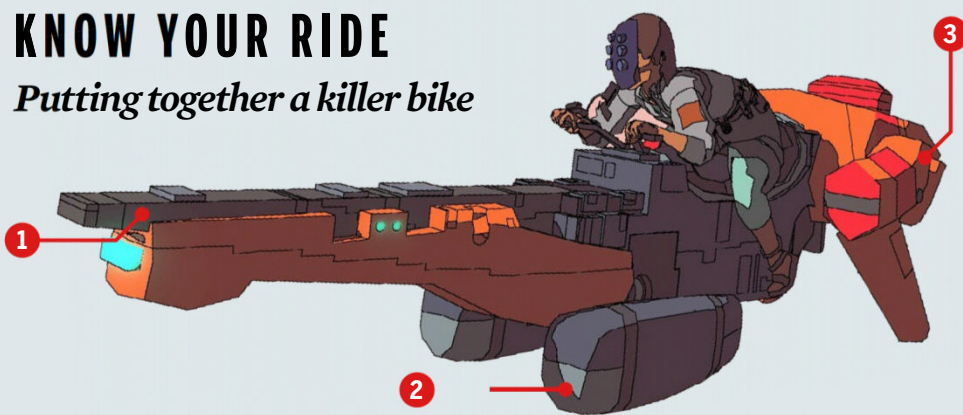
DESERT CHIC

As you travel you'll find more parts to customise your bike with, new colour schemes to paint it up. Your bike becomes as personal as your mask, an extension of your equally-customisable outfit. But while you'll find the occasional jacket or engine part while out on your travels, most items will require a massive bag of cold hard cuts (cash).

Every so often you'll find a station, outpost or town bustling with people who need errands run. Everyone around here knows gliders have nothing but time on their hands. What these jobs are depends on who's asking. A climber might need you to rescue their pal from a deep well, while a machinist might task you with repairing the local generator. The town guard may rope you into a fantastic investigation chain, one that sees you compiling evidence and narrowing down

KNOW YOUR RIDE

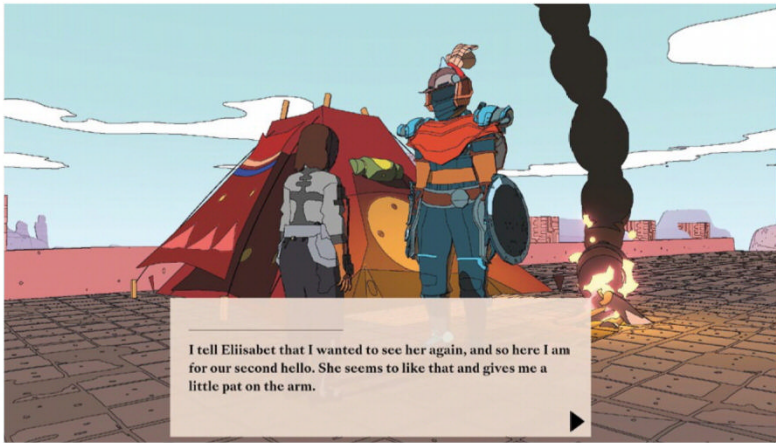
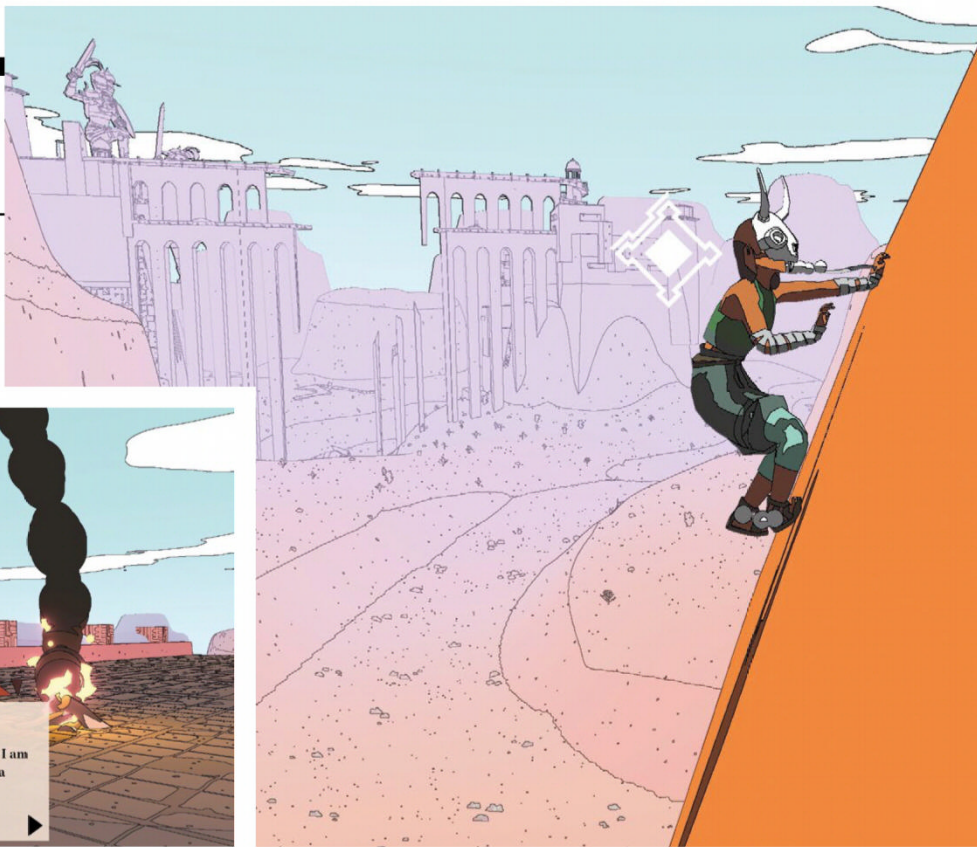
Putting together a killer bike



1 SPEEDSTER FRONT
Need to get across the badlands in a hurry? This sleek hood carves an elegant path at high speeds.

2 NOMADIC WING
These stabilisers might not be elegant, but they keep me from tumbling haphazardly over the dunes.

3 WHALE SHIP ENGINE
This high-tech motor salvaged from a long-dead ship is silent and totally emission-free.



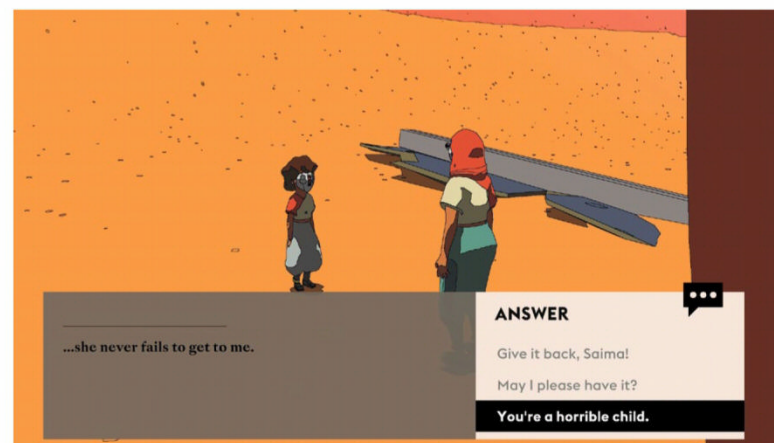
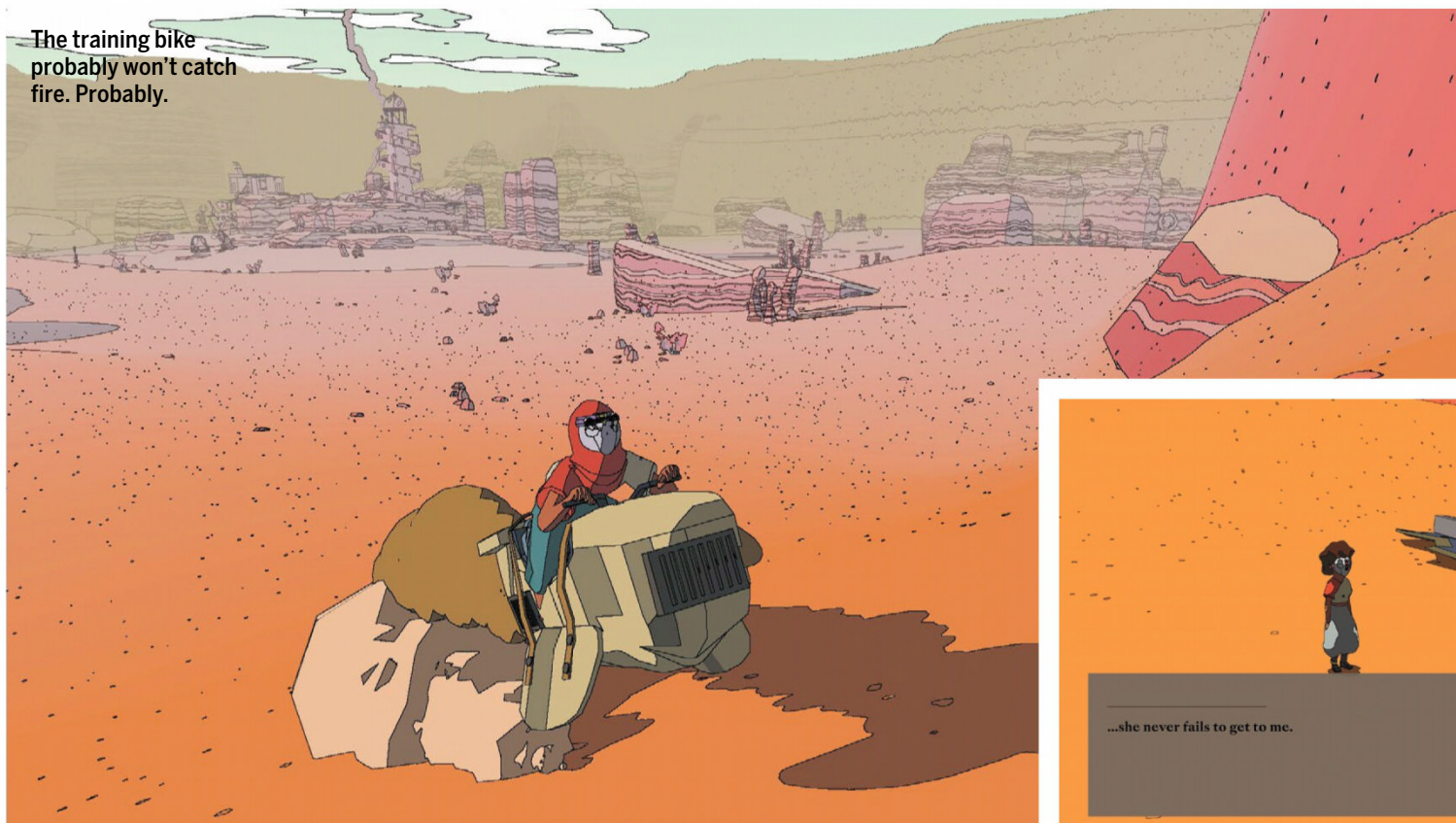
ABOVE: *Breath of the Wild?* Never heard of it.

LEFT: Row, row, row your... oh.



She's a beaut,
ain't she?

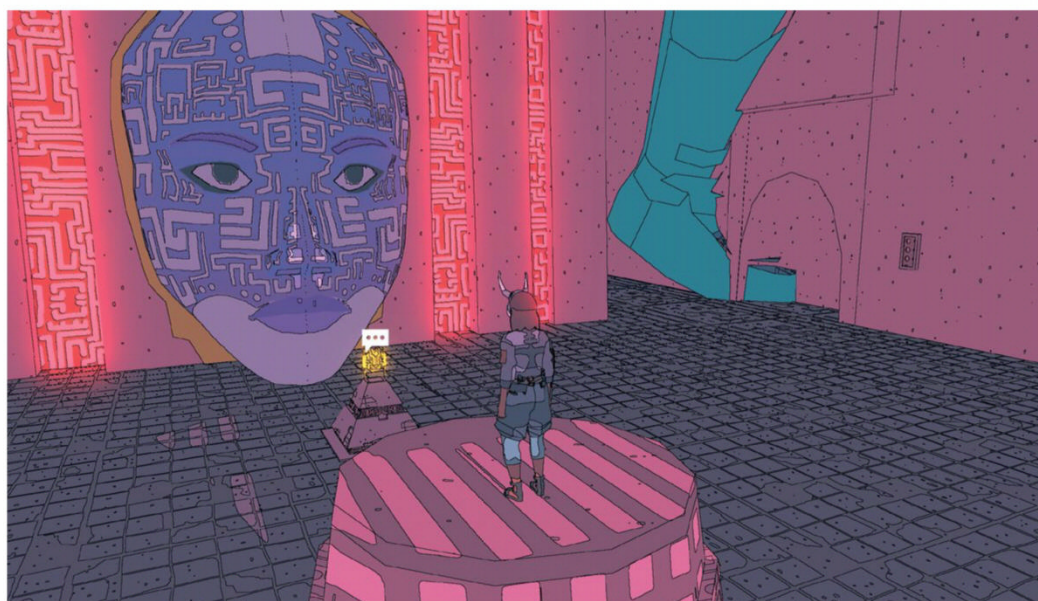
The training bike probably won't catch fire. Probably.



RIGHT: It's OK if you need to rest your legs.



FAR RIGHT: Some puzzles require a head-on approach.



BELOW: Yes, the bones rattle like xylophones when trodden upon.



» suspects before coming to your own conclusion as to whodunnit.

These reward you with their profession's respective badges. Earn three of a kind, and the mysterious Mask Casters will grant you a new mask. But earning masks isn't always so formalised. Scrappers will grant you badges simply for turning in the junk you find in derelict ships, while another saw me become a creature of myth – following cryptic markings across town to find where its previous owner had stashed it, using its unnatural gaze and local superstition to my own nefarious ends.

But so much of *Sable* is enjoyed in the spaces between spaces. There are vast, ancient starships to delve into and mystical ruins to uncover. Cartographers sit atop towering spires, whose maps will give you the lay of the land without specific named locations. There's an ecosystem of bugs with different behaviours. You'll only interact with these maybe once or twice apiece, but each encounter is memorable. There are even more enigmatic secrets waiting out there in the wastes, puzzles that require a little more lateral thinking to solve. Six hours after completion, and I'm still trying to figure out what's going on with that giant worm (you'll know it when you see it).

PICTURE PERFECT

Somehow, we've gone this long without talking about the absolutely gorgeous world inspired by French cartoonist Jean 'Moebius' Giraud. This isn't just cel-shading – Shedworks has taken utmost care in making every frame feel lifted from a graphic novel. Every region, every

time of day has a carefully considered palette and line weight. Distant scenery uses muted palettes and looser linework to draw attention to the foreground. Even *Sable*'s animations are staggered to give her motions a choppy, flip-book feel.

The only weakness comes at night in certain interiors, the game's

So much of *Sable* is enjoyed in the spaces between spaces

palette flattening to pure line-art. Some locations also struggle with their particular shader implementation, with distant mountains somehow turning semi-transparent in the evenings. It's a

reminder that *Sable* is a game made by less than a handful of people – a reality further reinforced by occasionally misplaced props, audio bugs, poor accessibility options, and some stuttering while driving (though the developer promises fixes within a few weeks of launch).

But that reality is easy to forget when you're riding your bike against bold sunsets or climbing some towering ruin sketched with an illustrator's flair. It also means that, while Shedworks has built a fairly vast open world, *Sable* is working at a limited scale – one that feels refreshingly manageable compared to the bloated open worlds of larger games. Every region is just the right size, packing a welcome handful of strange and unique landmarks to discover, while acutely aware of the importance of letting much of the land remain empty.

TRADING FACES

There is a gentle warmth to *Sable*'s world, one that never feels hostile even as you're navigating plumes of sulphuric ash. It's a warmth that extends to the game's writing. The

opening act doesn't just act as a microcosm of how quests and exploration work in this world, it works hard to make the Ibexii feel like your family. It's heart-breaking when a small child in the clan (who's nicked one of the engine parts you need) admits that they were simply scared of losing you to the world.

Sable is, ultimately, a game about needing space to figure yourself out. *Sable* is still a child, and the story sets no stakes above her figuring out who she wants to be. When she talks to guards or machinists, she imagines whether she could see herself in their shoes. More importantly, *Sable* learns that this doesn't stop when her Gliding finishes – finding yourself is an ongoing process. The Gliding is a personal, intimate ritual everyone in this world has gone through (some more than others). And while some folks may be stubborn and others see you as a spare set of hands, everyone is ultimately rooting for *Sable* to figure herself out.

Even RPG conventions like trying on new clothes and choosing how you talk to people feed into this theme. My *Sable* has quite literally tried on many faces, from supernatural trickster to starship spelunker, figuring out what bike works for her through a long process of trial and error. There is fast travel in the game, but I strongly urge against using it when so much of the game is about the distances between – letting you reflect on where you've been and anticipate where you're heading next, as you bond with the engine humming gently beneath you.

Before setting off on your journey, your clan-mate Hilal gives you a key piece of advice alongside your magic Gliding bubble, "Try to have fun. There's a lot to be said about ritual and independence and all of that out there, but... the world's an easier place if you put joy first."

That's *Sable*, to me. There are ruins to explore, people to meet, errands to run and all sorts of nick-nacks to collect. But if you just want to relax to some Japanese Breakfast melodies while riding a hoverbike across a pastel desert, that's quite alright too. ■



CHANGING FACES

It's 2021, and masks are still very much in fashion



YOUR FIRST MASK



YOUR CLAN'S MASK



THE CLIMBER'S FAVOURITE



THE SPECTRAL TRICKSTER



... BUG?

PC GAMER VERDICT

An intimate adventure across an utterly gorgeous world, *Sable* is one road trip I won't soon forget.

93

EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE

Discover a new kind of emotional intelligence in **LIFE IS STRANGE: TRUE COLORS**

By Rachel Watts

There's a moment in *Life is Strange: True Colors* where protagonist Alex angrily throws a bottle across a room and it smashes against a wall. Her rage is white-hot and only lasts an instant before melting away. Her brother, the only family she has, is dead and she's now just discovering his death might not have been an accident. The pain is too much and it overwhelms her. *True Colors* is about the power of emotions – both good and bad.

Where the series has previously dabbled in time travel and telekinesis, Alex's superpower is that she can see people's heightened emotions and even absorb them into her body, relieving them of their anger, sadness, and anxiety if she chooses. If a person is feeling an overwhelming emotion, she can see their auras and understand what they are going through. She's basically a human mood ring.

After spending her entire teenage life in foster care, her estranged brother Gabe manages to get in touch with her and invites her to live with him in Haven Springs, Colorado. But then he tragically dies, and Alex begins to feel like it could be connected to sinister goings on. She starts investigating the tranquil

mining town to find out what really happened, using her powers to see the townsfolk's true nature.

Life is Strange sure does love quaint American towns, and *True Colors*' Haven Springs slots into its tour of the US nicely. Deck Nine has

continued *Life is Strange*'s exploration system, where you interact with various people and items to get more information about the world. But what makes it feel refreshing in *True Colours* is it's the first

time you get to know more about the game's protagonist than anything or anyone around her.

Before you meet her, Alex has already lived an eventful life, and we learn this from her diary entries when she was in foster care, and

We get to know who Alex is as a person, her history and her strengths

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A coming-of-age adventure about a young woman who can feel the emotions of those around her

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Deck Nine

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600,
8GB RAM, Radeon RX
5700 XT

MULTIPLAYER
Nope

LINK
lifeisstrange.
square-enix-games.
com

through letters from friends who got adopted. It's not often we get to play as a character who has been through the foster care system, let alone someone who has been traumatised by it, and Deck Nine handles her situation with great care. We get to know who Alex is as a person, her history, and her strengths.

FEELIN' FINE

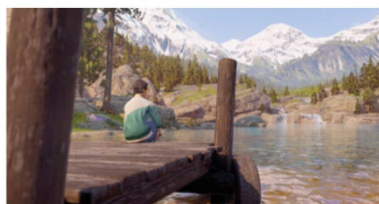
Alex's empathetic superpower is worked into exploration, too. People leave a mark on items they're connected to, and Alex is able to tap into that and find out more about a particular person – their thoughts, their emotions. Picking up something like a mug could reveal that someone is suffering from work stress, or holding a phone might expose the owner's anxiety about receiving a particular call. Although there are moments where the power's logic feels inconsistent, it always fits nicely into the overarching story.

Life is Strange is known for its choices and the drama that ripples from them, but I didn't really get that feeling in *True Colors*. There are important decisions, but you only see the payoff at the end of the game,



TOP: Alex is one of the best characters in the series to date.





TOP: A quiet little town with a dark secret. Classic!

ABOVE: It's basically Haven on Earth.

which is a long time to wait to see how your choices turned out. On the positive side, one of these end game decisions is whether to romance either the beanie-wearing Steph or park ranger Ryan, so it's great to see Deck Nine continuing *Life is Strange's* positive queer representation with the openly bisexual Alex.

Although *True Colors* has its pitfalls, I've never had this much fun with a *Life is Strange* game. Previous games in the series have dealt with some heavy topics, like suicide and racism, so even when there are happy moments, they often come across as a fleeting moment in an unfair world. *True Colors* has its fair share of drama, but it also has moments of incredible joy. The whole emotional spectrum is present, and Alex experiences them all deeply within a story that respects those feelings.

To see Alex throw that glass bottle across the room in anger at her cruel circumstances is incredible and heartbreaking – an emotional gut-punch. *True Colors* is full of these moments. It's a story that lets a young queer woman unashamedly cry, scream, and be joyful free from shame, and that's incredibly special. ■



PC GAMER

VERDICT

Visually gorgeous and emotionally raw, *True Colors* is an incredible continuation of the *Life is Strange* series.

86



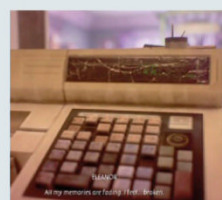
Fear, anger, and frustration are just part of being human.

POWER TRIP

Alex can use her psychic abilities in a number of ways



AURAS
Alex can tell how a person is feeling from the colour of their aura.



SENSE
Items hold the thoughts that characters associate with them.



ABSORB
Taking away a person's emotions relieves them, but can have repercussions.



SURROUNDINGS
Alex is able to see the world around her as another person perceives it.

GUITAR HERO

THE ARTFUL ESCAPE is an epic rock opera of psychedelic perfection

By Rachel Watts

Francis Vendetti is in a bit of an artistic rut. He's a teenage musical prodigy given the opportunity to continue the legacy of his dead uncle, a legendary folk singer who could spin poetry from a few guitar twangs. But Francis' musical ambitions lie in a different type of music – the cosmic kind. He dreams of rock and roll riffs so epic they'll traverse dimensions and jams so extreme they'll create rifts across the galaxy.

The Artful Escape is a story-driven platform adventure about Francis' journey to guitar stardom. In his quiet Colorado hometown, the community is expecting him to continue his uncle's musical tradition and have planned a debut show that will kick start his career. But on the night of the performance, he gets whisked away on a strange intergalactic adventure, one that helps him discover his new psychedelic stage persona.

On Francis' quest to establish the most elaborate act the world has ever seen, you'll get to see a tour of a menagerie of landscapes, jamming with various intergalactic beasts and beings. You'll be impressing nightclub hosts, lighting up cave discos, and shocking strange alien civilisations with your new groove.

As you travel through levels, it's less about platforming and more about putting on a great show. Holding down X prompts Francis to start shredding on his guitar, which lights up the world around him as he travels through it. Plants and flowers flare with light, stars in the sky shatter into fireworks, and creatures burst to life – it's a duet between you and the

environment. Much of each level is just you running to the right and occasionally jumping, but there's so much going on around you that it's a glorious spectacle. You can just sit back and enjoy the ride. Sliding down snowy peaks and rocking a solo couldn't be more breezy.

There are occasions where Francis has to perform on stage, either at a show or to impress an

Holding down X prompts Francis to start shredding on his guitar

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A story-driven musical sci-fi rock opera through space

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Beethoven and Dinosaur

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600,
Radeon RX 5700 XT,
8GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
theartfulescape.com

all-powerful (but musically picky) alien overlord. This is where the music-making mechanic comes into play, tasking you to mimic button combinations in a call and response style. It's essentially a musical Simon Says, but one that doesn't really change over the course of the story, but when it comes to these performances, the visuals and sound do a lot of the heavy lifting.

SPACE SAUNTER

Testing the player's ability to copy a pattern of flashing colours isn't really the point of *The Artful Escape*. Guitar shredding against a rich orchestral soundscape is so effortless and easy, anyone could do it. It's a heartfelt love letter to music, which isn't surprising since the game's head developer is a literal rockstar: Johnny Galvatron, former lead singer of The Galvatrons. You can feel the love of music in every chord you trash. No guitar solo sounds the same, which is quite the feat in a five-hour game.

Joining Galvatron's epic guitar licks is an eclectic star-studded cast each playing their own cosmic weirdo. Jason Schwartzman voices a dead-pan floating brain in a jar, Mark Strong plays an intergalactic music producer, Francis' eccentric mentor and space guide is brought to life by Carl Weathers, and Lena Headey of *Game of Thrones* fame makes for a magnificent, if frightening, all-powerful cosmic entity.

But under the blockbuster casting, dazzling worlds, and awesome guitar wailing is a sincere story. Francis' journey of self-discovery has a universal feel – his just happens to be part of a spectacular light show that will leave your head spinning and ears ringing. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

The Artful Escape is an eye-popping musical adventure that will leave you with a serious case of galaxy brain.

75

ROCK-SONA

Every rockstar needs a look to match the sound

1 OBNOXIOUS HAIRCUT

Get a ridiculous hairstyle that not even you can pull off.

2 GAUDY GLASSES

Save your retinas from getting lasered during your light show.

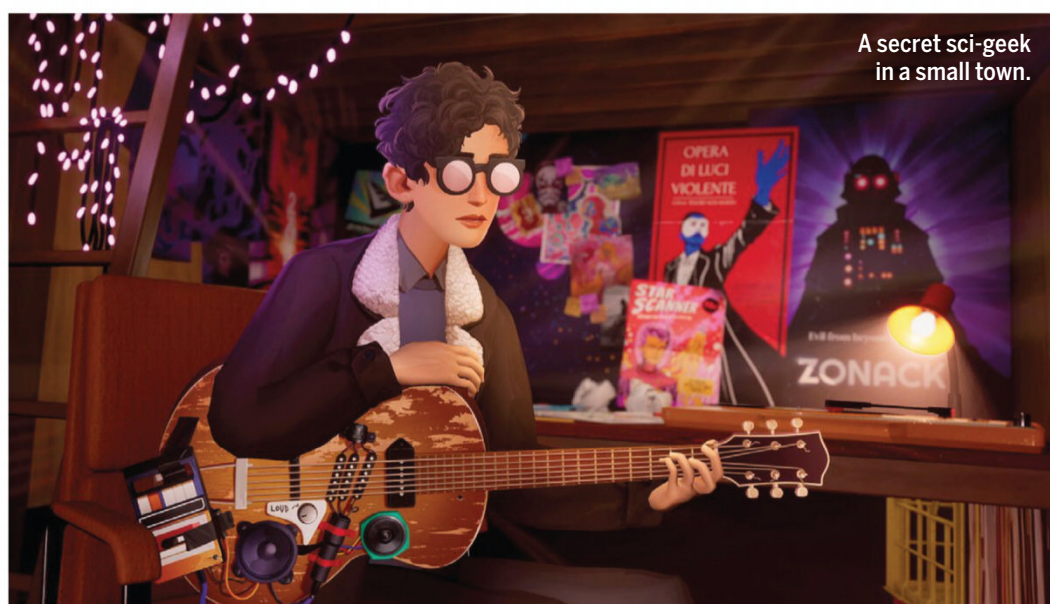
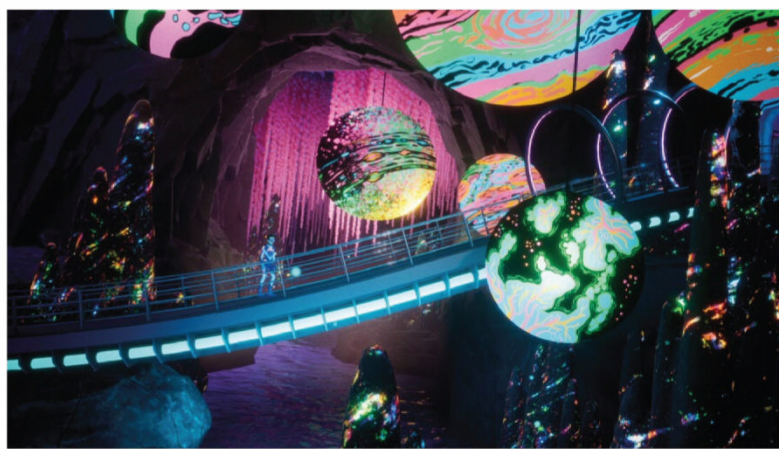
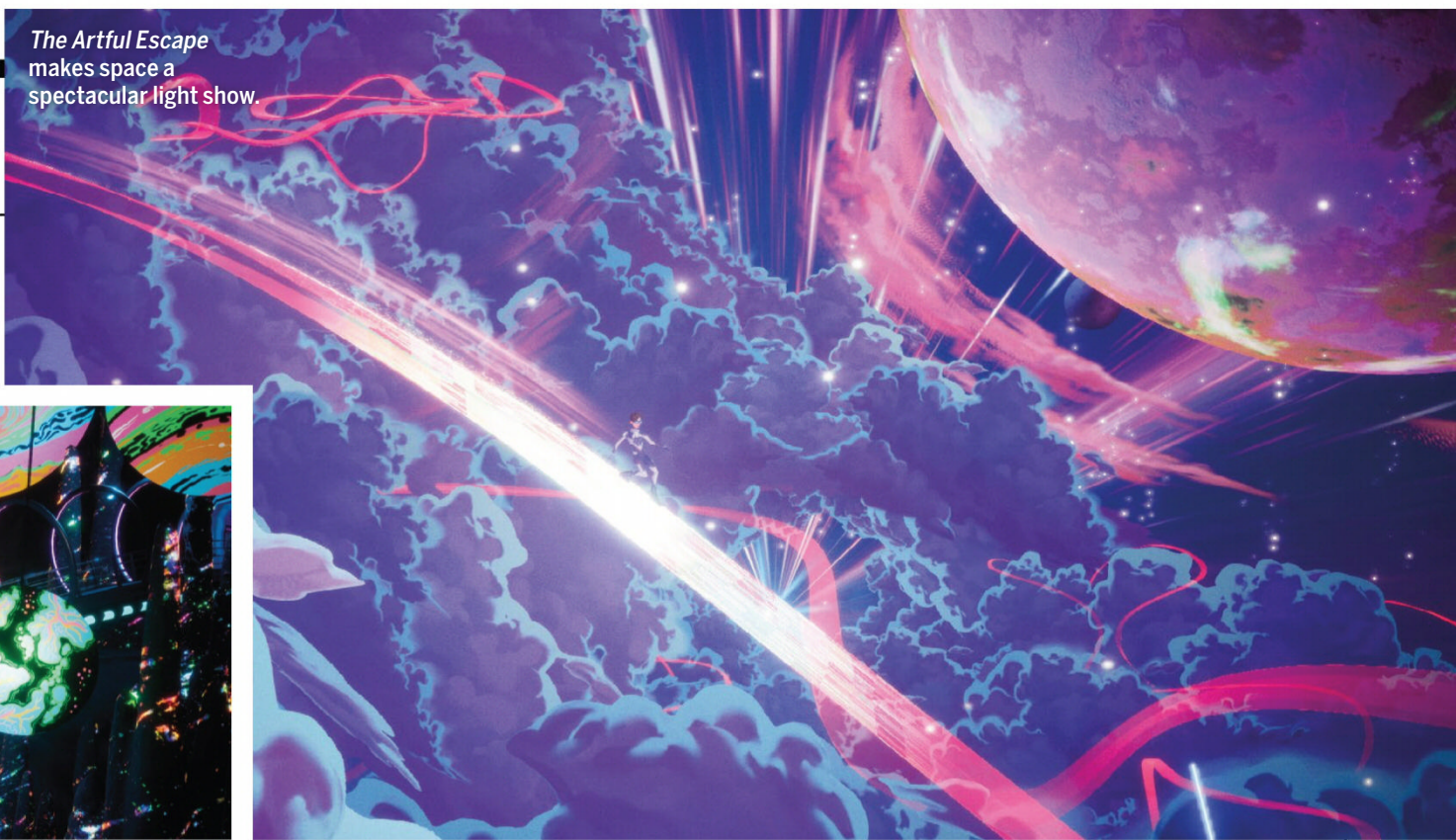
3 MESH TOP

It's actually illegal to be a rockstar and not wear a single item of clothing made of mesh.

4 GUITAR

Doesn't even have to sound that good, just pick one that makes a statement.

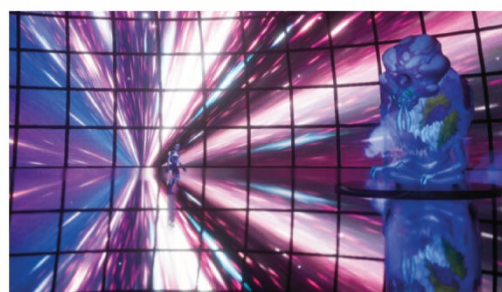
The Artful Escape makes space a spectacular light show.



A secret sci-geek in a small town.



LEFT: Lightman is essentially an intergalactic Doc Brown.



BOTTOM: No idea what this is but it knows how to jam.



COMBO BREAKER

NARAKA: BLADEPOINT keeps the battle royale genre fresh

By Tyler Wilde

I didn't take *Naraka: Bladepoint* seriously at first, and it didn't give me many reasons to. In its tutorial, the melee-focused battle royale game teaches you to combo by clicking repeatedly and then introduces its countering system without really explaining it. After that, it matches you against bots for your first game. The bots behave like mosquitos whose brains were just transplanted into human bodies, so of course my trio won easily.

A few matches later, however, the true nature of 60-player martial arts battle royale showed itself. One moment you're Donnie Yen, and the next you're scrambling to find the 'pick up' prompt for the sword that just flew out of your hands in a whirl of particle effects. It's too late, though. As Fist of the North Star's Kenshiro would say, "You are already dead."

Being disarmed was humbling, so I went back into *Naraka's* poorly-localised menus to find the training mode, which is a little ramshackle but does the job, and the Narakapedia, a useful guide that introduces ideas the tutorial skips. As I grew from a *Naraka: Bladeboy* into a *Naraka: Blademan*, I started to see a complex and elegant game of skill.

What I should've realised is that those basic combos are easy to counter. You can end a combo early, though, or use charge attacks, which are less predictable and can be cancelled out – allowing you to feint. There are other tricks to learn, and once you do, the mind games I enjoy in slower melee games such as *Chivalry 2* emerge. They're just hard to follow, because everything in *Naraka* happens in dazzling flurries influenced by the magic and physical lightness of Chinese wuxia fiction.

The sword, spear, and dagger animations are fast and weightless, and the timing game is about memorisation more than intuition, which feels a little old fashioned. The absence of fall damage is a great,

Tianhai's ultimate transforms him into a six-armed giant

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Martial arts battle royale with melee and ranged combat

EXPECT TO PAY
£18

DEVELOPER
24 Entertainment

PUBLISHER
NetEase Games Montréal

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i5-9600K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia RTX 2070 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
narakathegame.com

modern-feeling outcome of *Naraka's* genre inspiration. What a relief it is to be able to move freely: double jumping, grappling between buildings with a hookshot, and climbing trees and towers (you've got all the *Assassin's Creed* parkour skills).

Naraka is a fast, aggressive battle royale game. You can be stealthy, but crouch-walking isn't strictly necessary when you can't be killed from a bush 200 meters away. The freedom to play fast and loose suits the seven heroes and their special and ultimate abilities. Wandering monk Tianhai's ultimate transforms him into a six-armed giant, for instance; he's not someone you'd expect to find hiding in a bathroom.

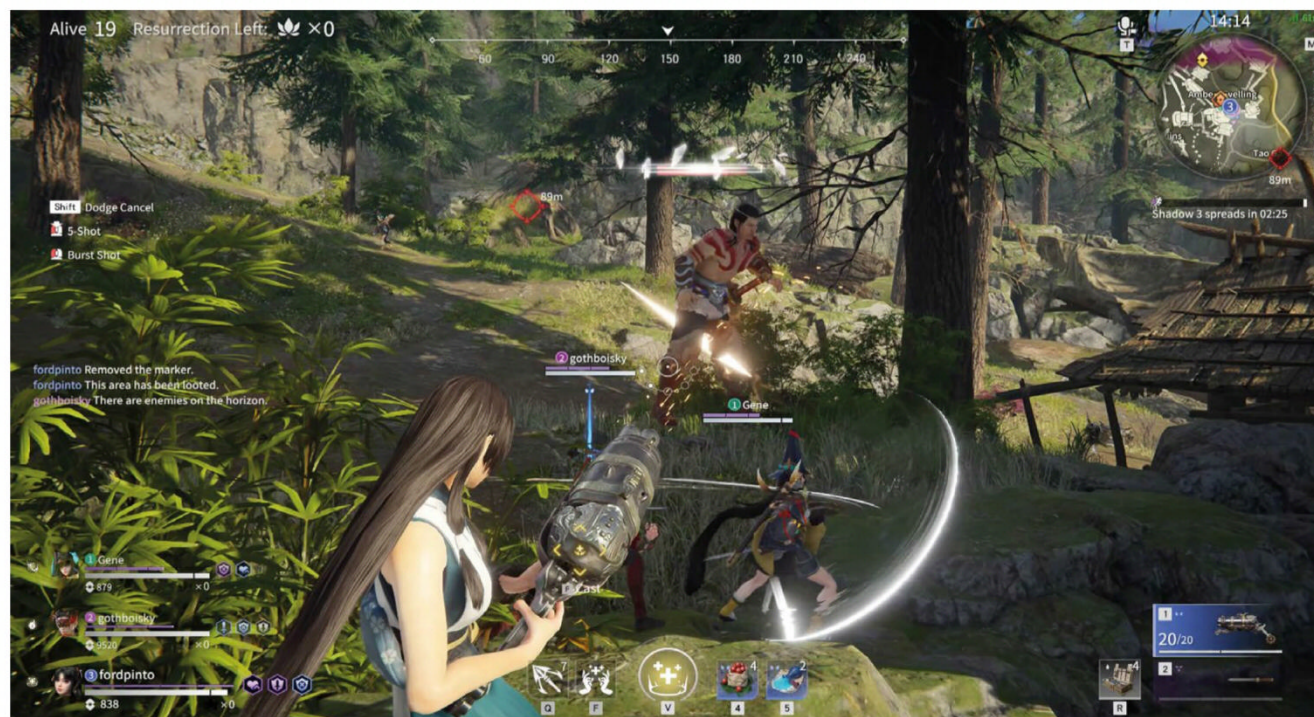
NARAKA'D

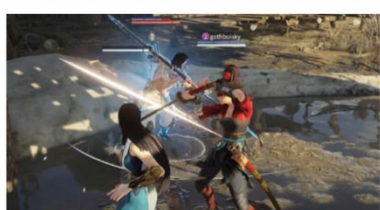
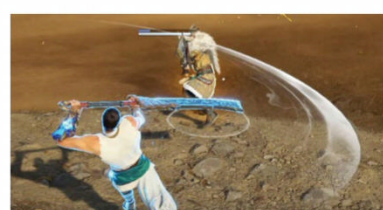
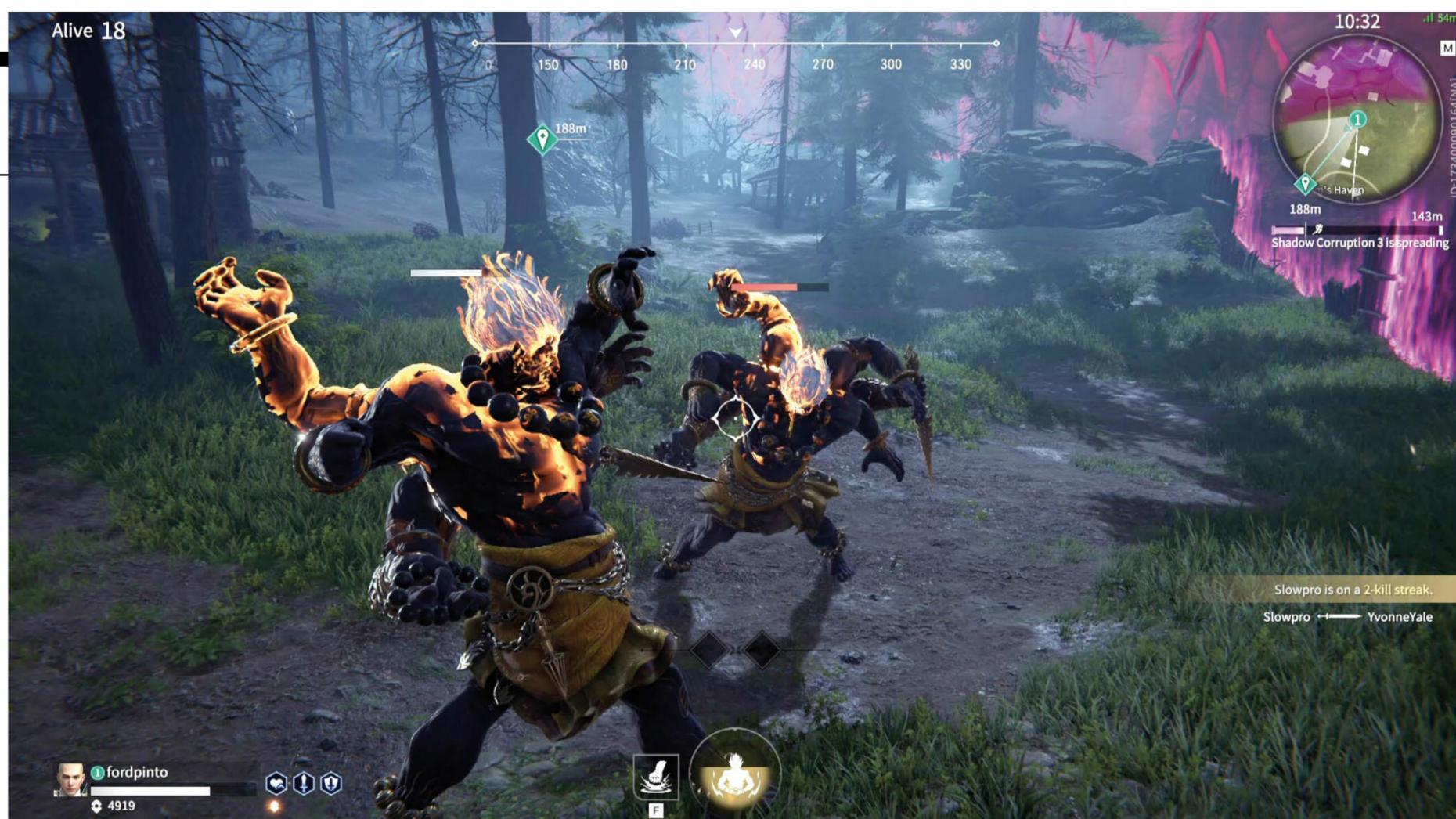
Naraka is most popular in China, and some players complain of laggy region-hoppers, but I'm hardly alone in playing on the US west coast. One cool feature: local leaderboards. I'm the 17th best Tianhai in Oakland, apparently, although that's only because he's not popular, and because it thinks I live 40 miles to the north. It needs some tweaking, but I love the depth of the stat recording, and



TOP: The camera angles can get quite awkward.

RIGHT: The pistol is more steampunk magic thing than 'gun'.





TOP: When two Tianhai's fight, the whole thing feels a bit pointless.

FAR RIGHT: I've never made practical use of it, but there's a ballista.

Naraka surprises with other extras, too: you can create custom private matches, and hero faces can be modified with a character creator.

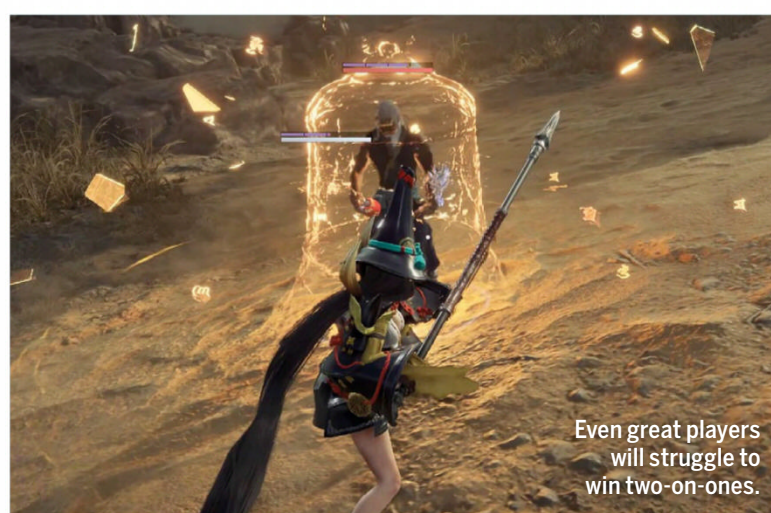
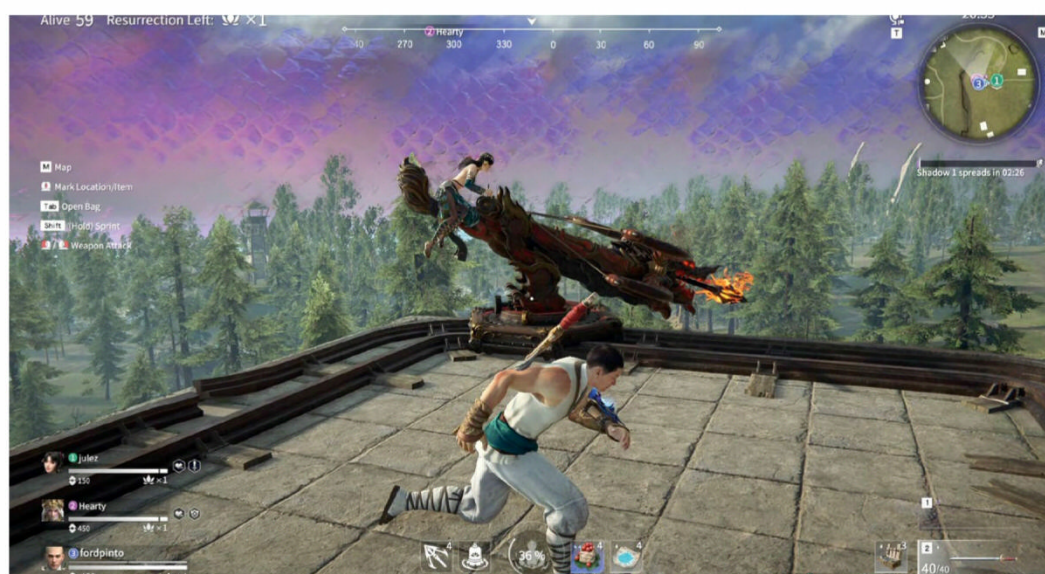
There are also a comical number of progression tracks and currencies and rewards. I like *Naraka*, but I don't need a cool outfit enough to click around collecting taxes from each district of the menu. Parts of that mess do modify in-game capabilities, though, adding maintenance chores and pointless uncertainty to the game. It's not 'pay-to-win,' but setting a -2.40% dash energy cost modifier has never made anyone smile.

Other disappointments are more novel. One surprise for FPS battle royale players is that *Naraka* works best in solos, where you won't end up in impossible 1v2 and 1v3 fights. I'd still rather play trios with friends, but I love the tension in big solo free-for-all fights, where everyone wants to get a kill but is always also on the verge of running away to heal, simultaneously playing cat and mouse. When it gets down to two healed-up players stalking each other through the trees, *Naraka's* thrills match the genre's best. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Battle royale that's fun to play in a loose, aggressive style, with combat that's trickier than it may first appear.

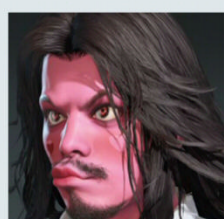
73



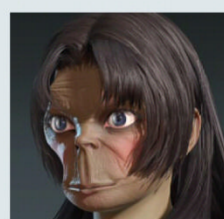
Even great players will struggle to win two-on-ones.

FUN WITH FACE SLIDERS

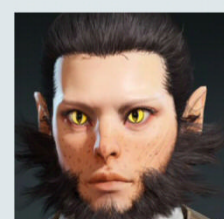
Here are some of the looks we made for our heroes



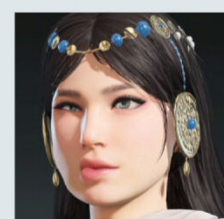
SMOUCHER
My man is ready for battle and kisses.



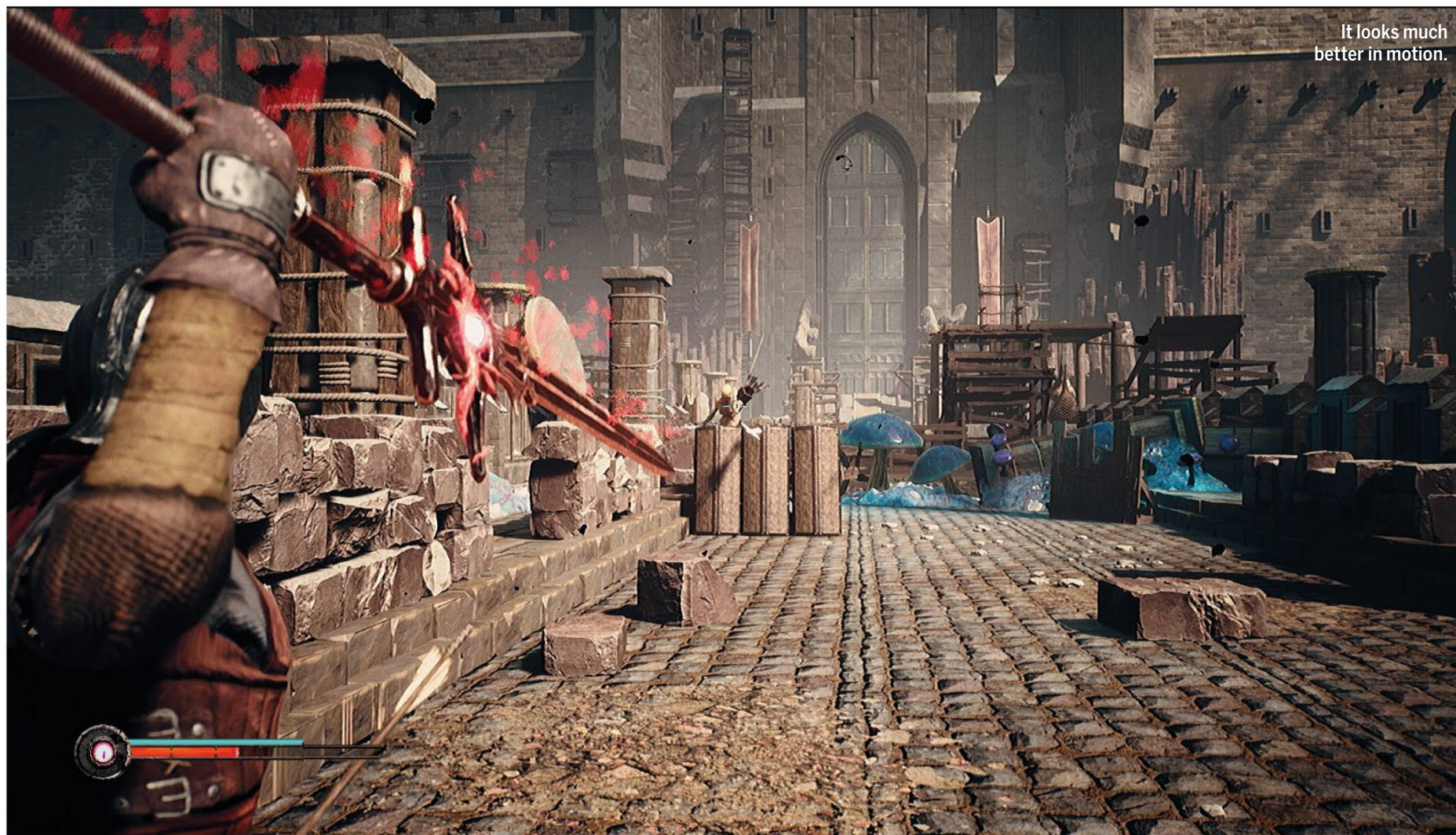
ET
Definitely not from around here.



MR. MEOW
A refugee from a failed movie musical.



PUFFY
It's just a mild allergic reaction.



BLOODY HELL

Skewering undead with a chatty stick in the impressive **BLOOD SPEAR**

Blood Spear is a student project that puts its own spin on the Souls-like formula. Gone are the souls, the bonfires, or any sense of character advancement. All that remains is an undead medieval world, and the titular spear: a sentient weapon that thirsts for blood, and that has an eyeball embedded in it.

It's not entirely clear if you play as the Blood Spear, or the poor dead knight it has possessed. Either way, the pair are soon up and running through a few attractive environments, killing undead and floating eyeballs on their way to the boss. Blood Spear took me about an hour, feeling like a slice of a bigger action game. However, there was enough space for the spear to be given a proper workout.

There are no other weapons here, and no equipment or items to pick up. Instead, you fling the Blood Spear, while occasionally dodging enemies and incoming missiles. Handily, you don't have to retrieve the spear – as it seems to throw a magical copy instead – but you have a couple of moves that will inflict additional damage. Firstly, you can charge your

attack. Simple enough. But secondly, you can *explode* the spears when they're lodged in the enemy, for a sizeable extra chunk of damage.

It's a neat combat system that you're tested on fairly regularly, for example by the zombies holding enormous tower shields, which

require multiple exploding spears to beat. There's also a multi-stage boss fight at the end of the game: a floating head accompanied by a pair of smashy, floating hands. It feels like something out of a

platformer, and I mean that as a compliment – not every Souls-like boss has to be a solemn duel against a giant corrupted knight.

Overall, I didn't find Blood Spear's combat overly challenging, and that was partly due to the way it handles death. If your revived knight pegs it,

It's a neat combat system that you're tested on fairly regularly

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An action game where you wield a sentient, blood-obsessed spear

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Blood Spear Dev

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/BloodSpear

the spear will transfer to another, who will already be present in the world as a wispy NPC.

SPEAR FACTOR

When you're not flinging spears, you'll be admiring the daunting architecture, which looks less attractive in this screenshot thanks to an aggressive visual effect. There's some memorable imagery, but not a hint of the intricate world design this genre is known for. Instead, you linearly traipse from one narrow area to another. This is a guided tour more than it is a world.

Still, I've played bigger, fuller Souls-likes with fewer ideas than the diminutive Blood Spear. The novel combat system is well-implemented, and its eyeball protagonist is a fascinating little critter. Delay your latest run of Dark Souls for an hour and give this striking, polished Souls-like a play. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Blood Spear by Blood Spear Dev is a brief, linear Souls-like that packs a lot of cool ideas into just an hour.

70

BELOW: You can just about see Streusel up ahead.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Sebastian Baracaldo

LINK
bit.ly/3u7VeEl

LOST AND FOUND

Stacking chicks in 3D platformer **ALPACA STACKA**

Paz the alpaca might be the star of this 3D platformer, but it's Streusel who makes it: the jealous squirrel who kicks it off by opening a gate and letting loose five adorable chicks. He's the heart of a five-minute game that feels remarkably full, despite its brief length, and that has much to do with Streusel's funny, redemptive journey.

After the chick-loosing incident, Paz volunteers to find them, roaming the island and following clues to each of the birds. One of them likes a particular tree, for example, while another enjoys running in circles. It's not very complicated, and anyway the island is so small you're going to find them all eventually, whether it takes you five minutes or ten.

Two things make *Alpaca Stacka* stand out. The first is the stacking.

Rescued chicks are stored vertically on your back, against your long neck: a sight that only gets funnier as you acquire more of them. They don't ever fall off, or weigh the alpaca down – the stacking is just a nice visual incentive for finding them.

But as you explore, Streusel rears his head. Or rather, his bushy tail, which frequently emerges from nearby shrubbery as you jump about. Obviously he's following you, and doing a terrible job of hiding. Get too close and Streusel will hurriedly retrieve his tail. It's a lovely bit of programming that reminds you what the game is about: a jealous squirrel who feels excluded, and lashes out.

This is basically a playable picture book, complete with a feel-good ending. Come for the sturdy 3D platforming, leave with a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. ■

73

BLADE RUNNER

Rushing bosses in the lean **HEXBLADE**

I appreciate the purity of a game free of regular enemies. Do we really enjoy fighting the same monsters, using the same tactics, just to get back to the boss? Can we not just enjoy a peaceful walk to the massive creature that will immediately murder us?

Hexblade is in the same sphere as games like *Titan Souls* and *Furi*, in that the only enemies you'll be battling are bosses. But here they're queued up in the same hallway, emerging one after another, even saving you the trouble of making your way to each boss arena.

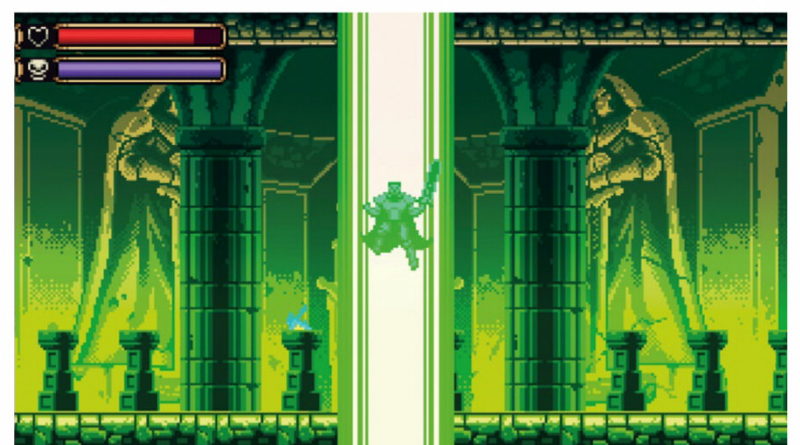
For a small jam game, *Hexblade's* bosses are decently complex, and pretty challenging. If you stumbled across these fiends in a full-fledged Metroidvania, you wouldn't think anything was out of place. While lacking multiple boss stages, there are

patterns to memorise, projectiles to dodge, and weak points that can be tricky to reach with your sword. Die and you'll return to before the latest boss (thankfully), so it's easy to retry when your luck runs out.

Satisfying as it is, I probably wouldn't be writing about *Hexblade* if it wasn't for the novel Curse bar under the hero's health. This discourages button-mashing by filling up when you swing your blade – and killing you outright when it tops. It's a great idea that made me check my attacking a few times, if not *quite* to the extent I imagine the developer was hoping for.

Still, it's a neat innovation, in a boss rush videogame that's worthy of your time. Here's hoping the mechanic will return some day, whether it's in *Hexblade 2* or a game inspired by it. ■

BELOW: Attack too quickly, without pausing, and you'll die.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Rôger Goulart

LINK
r-goulart.itch.io

66

Big Bang Mummy is the new Techno Viking.



PHARAOH ENOUGH

Enjoying the ordinary in **STRANGE BRIGADE**

Look lively! The British have arrived. Among other geopolitical transgressions, we're here to pilfer your treasures and store them for safekeeping in the British Museum. The good news? Entry is free and you can buy a commemorative pencil-with-eraser on the way out. Much easier than storing priceless relics in your own country. We'll even deal with any supernatural threats while we're at it, just so long as you let us keep the valuables. Tally ho!

This isn't the exact premise of *Strange Brigade* – there's more emphasis on defeating unspeakable forces than burglary, and it's softened by the presence of Malai warrior Nalangu – but it speaks to how utterly daft it all is. An already farcical premise becomes funnier with historical context. A team of gun-toting, predominantly-British treasure hunters travel to distant lands, drop out of a *literal blimp*, and knock the neverliving shit out of mummified relics. Reanimated, evil relics, admittedly – but it nevertheless feels like we're waltzing around a colonial subtext. Or it might, at least, if *Strange Brigade* had the slightest interest in subtext. It's a game so gleefully uninterested in subtlety that

we have a plummy, thigh-slapping, crumpets-and-incest narrator commentating on your every move, whether it's shooting a porcelain cat or exploding zombies. And you know what? That's why it's a laugh. Subtext is for cowards and *Strange Brigade* is brave. It struts directly at you, laughing heartily, with all the confidence of a born-to-rule hereditary peer approaching a funeral dessert trolley.

Enemies are jittery enough that every headshot feels like a triumph

DEAD POSH

Levels are simple but elegant. Enemies are jittery enough that every headshot feels like a triumph. The basic puzzles slow you down without ever stumping you. But most of all, it feels fun to shoot stuff. A low bar for a game just about guns, perhaps, but

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
How Your Dad Imagines The British Empire: The Game

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Rebellion

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3A9cX0q

others have tried and failed. It's an honest, repetitive gameplay loop and just enough to keep me engaged in single player, thanks to its gentle, wooden roller coaster of skirmishes and survival, but it ironically comes to life when played with friends. The campaign is a blast with mates, thanks to some effective, obstacle-based bottlenecking and enjoyable bosses. The score attack and horde modes squeeze a little more juice out of what can, at times, feel like a slightly spartan experience. As you might expect given the theme, nothing here is new, but saying that feels like criticising kids playing hide-and-seek for being unoriginal.

Strange Brigade feels like a holiday to somewhere nearby but not abroad. It's the Lake District AirBnB of squad shooters. If the weather's bad we'll stay inside. If it's good we'll go outside and save the world from a reanimated Egyptian sorceress. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Strange Brigade is predictable but enjoyable. A squad shooter for the decision fatigue generation.

71

BELOW: Sweet revenge for all that agonising bolognese prep.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Studio MDHR

PUBLISHER
In-house

BEVERAGE QUIT

I can't get my fill of **CUPHEAD**

The Asian palm civet is a type of small mammal native to native to Southeast Asia. It's notable for its role in the production of kopi luwak, a tremendously expensive luxury beverage. The shy, cat-like civet ventures forth from the jungle and feasts on the finest coffee cherries. But it can't digest the coffee bean, so it shits them out, imparting a smoothness to the roasted coffee that connoisseurs celebrate, and the resultant brew is sold for exorbitant prices. And there's something about this long, unlikely, decadent process that reminds me of *Cuphead*. Every time I down one of the game's elegant enemies I feel a shudder of guilt, like I'm knocking back kopi luwak as if it were lukewarm Maxwell House with two sweeteners.

Luckily, *Cuphead* is hard as balls, so it's not something that happens with any regularity. Despite this, I

don't think I deserve a game with this level of artistic grind, much like artisanal anal-gland coffee would likely be wasted on me. There's so much craft in every frame that it feels like someone, somewhere must have been exploited to make this. Likewise, the difficulty spikes sometimes make me feel like I'm paying someone so I can drink shit. It's by no means impossible, but it still delights in recalling a more punitive era of gaming, where every level was capped off with a boss you could never hope to beat first time. In some ways, this is part of the appeal. There's something reassuringly nostalgic about *Cuphead*, even beyond the 1930s visuals. Knowing I'll probably fail at least four times is a strange comfort blanket, and one that makes the experience more enjoyable than other 'hard' games. ■

85



INDIANA JONES AND THE EMPEROR'S TOMB

Nobody here has the energy to interrogate why the fourth Indiana Jones film was such a turd necklace. Instead, let's just agree that *The Emperor's Tomb* would be a more-than adequate replacement. It's the secret best *Indiana Jones* game. It's worth your time for the fighting system alone: a cinematic mix of slaps, chops, backhands, and shattered chairs that recalls the golden era of Hollywood fight scenes, before Jason Bourne and Doug Liman decided that all action scenes had to be shakier than a foal on stilts. On top of this there are quips, whips, traps, treasures, and beautiful ladies: everything an *Indy* game needs and more. ■

72



GRIM FANDANGO REMASTERED

If Stanley Tucci was a game, he'd be *Grim Fandango*: a smart, erudite puzzler that somehow manages to combine hard-boiled 1930s fantasy and Día de los Muertos into one compelling package. It shouldn't work. And in the wrong hands it could have ended up eel-flavoured ice cream. But work it does, combining into something classy and intoxicating, like a negroni mixed by a Hollywood bartender. In Manny Calavera we have a genuinely compelling PC hero: flawed, funny, and engaging. And as well as looking and sounding sharper, this version even has tweaked controls to make it more manageable for modern hands. ■

88



Advanced Audrey Hepburn Simulator never got the greenlight on Steam.

NANCY DREW: SECRET OF THE OLD CLOCK

Rounding off our 1930s theme is a Nancy Drew mystery that feels like it's set inside an animatronic seaside attraction. It's expansive for an elderly puzzle game, but it's still adorably basic. In a world of mouse-and-keyboard shooters it feels odd going back to a game where a 360° turn is like rotating a shipping container. It's the quintessential Drew game, packed with mild peril and the suggestion of supernatural mystery. Two points for the pie puzzle. ■

64

available
at
wilko

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THE PERFECT GIFT, EVERY TIME

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wilko

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HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



96

GROUP TEST

Our review of the best budget microphones on the market.

100

TECH REPORT

How artificial intelligence is helping us create better computers.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Find the best PC build for you, whether you're broke or minted.

GROUP TEST

BUDGET MICROPHONES

You don't need to spend a lot to whisper sweet nothings over the world wide web.

By Jorge Jimenez

The phrase 'best cheap microphone' is no longer an oxymoron. One of last year's most surprising hardware trends was the rise of budget streaming microphones for £100 or less, with brands like Rode and HyperX getting in on the action with stripped-down mics that focus purely on sounding great at low cost.

The catch is that some of these cheap microphones will be lacking some common features you might find for more cash, like volume control. Hell, a lot of these budget mics don't even have a mute button. The idea is that you can do all that with third-party software like OBS or Xsplit instead.

Yet while some might be turned off by a lack of extra features, the sound quality and low price more than make up for it in our eyes. These cheap mics give the budding content creator everything they need to get started for as little as £40.



2



SoloCast

HYPERX £65

Simply awesome

1 The HyperX SoloCast is a budget microphone that sounds just as good as, if not better than, microphones available for double the price. It's less flashy than HyperX's more out-there microphone, the QuadCast S. I won't lie, I miss the RGB lighting. However, the sound quality on this mic is just incredible for the money. Even when comparing the two, the sound quality is scarily similar when using cardioid mode across both.

So it more than makes up for losing out on some of the quality-of-life features. It does well against the competition too

– while the JLab Audio Talk GO and Razer Seiren Mini offer great sound, the HyperX SoloCast still reigns as the king of budget microphones. It gives us the audio chops of its pricier QuadCast S compatriot but for a fraction of the price, and with portability and simplicity it's ace for gaming or streaming.

Quality streaming gear at more affordable prices means that more people can easily create that sweet content.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Sounds nearly identical to QuadCast
- Great price
- Portable design

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / CONNECTIVITY: USB / RECORDING SAMPLE RATE: 48 KHZ / FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20-20,000 HZ / FEATURES: TAP-TO-MUTE SENSOR

Seiren Mini

RAZER £50

Aw, it's so cute

2 Remember earlier I mentioned that some of these microphones had to sacrifice some features? Yeah, well, the Seiren Mini pretty much gives up everything. Some people won't care because you're getting a killer mic for £50. At the same time, some other people won't get over the fact that there's no mute button. That said, the Razer Seiren Mini is one of those obnoxiously adorable pieces of hardware I instantly want to put on my desk. Its stylish pill-shaped design and colour variety give the Mini the personality lacking in some of

our other choices on this list. And it sounds incredible, to boot. The Mini's super-cardioid polar pattern does a better job of tapering down background noise to focus on what's in front of it, though it does sound a bit softer than the Seiren Emote at its default gain. HyperX's mic does sound slightly better than the Mini but not by much, which is an impressive feat on its own considering how much the SoloCast has impressed us.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Pill-shaped design
- Great sound
- No mute button

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / CONNECTIVITY: USB / RECORDING SAMPLE RATE: 48 KHZ / FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20-20,000 HZ / FEATURES: TAP-TO-MUTE SENSOR

GROUP TEST



DOES A GREAT JOB OF PROVIDING A DECENT-SOUNDING MICROPHONE FOR PODCASTERS AND STREAMERS ON A BUDGET

3

Audio Talk

JLAB £50

Best of the rest

3 The JLab Audio Talk GO had long been my benchmark for cheap and compact microphones. It still does a great job of providing a decent-sounding microphone for podcasters and streamers on a budget, and its small stature and companion stand are perfect for anyone looking for a microphone that travels well and doesn't take up much space on your desk.

Even though the GO only has a pair of condensers, the sound of my voice still came out better than expected, although a bit tinny than I would like. You may not be recording the next hit

single on this microphone anytime soon, but it is great if you're dipping your toes into the streaming or podcasting scenes.

I've tested a few different mics from JLab Audio. Given its history in the affordable audio space, it's no surprise the Talk GO was the USB microphone that impressed me more than its more expensive offerings, the Talk and Talk Pro. The Talk GO is a great microphone without sounding or feeling cheap.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Good starter mic
- Subtle RGB
- Portable design

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID, OMNIDIRECTIONAL / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB / **RECORDING SAMPLE RATE:** 96 KHZ / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20-20,000 HZ / **FEATURES:** TRIPOD

Nano

BLUE YETI £100

Feature-packed and compact

4 This miniature version of the classic Blue Yeti is the perfect microphone for those just starting with streaming. It has an excellent sound quality for a product under £100 and it offers gain control and a mute button on the device. Also its tiny size and lightweight metal build make it easy to transport (this is at least 40% smaller than its larger cousin), which is handy if you need to travel around. The downside is the Yeti Nano sits as an outlier as the most 'expensive' budget mic I've considered for this list, but at least it offers more than the

cheaper mics by way of features. Its 24-bit, 48 kHz recording sample rate makes is noticeable, too – putting audio from the Nano and original Yeti side by side reveals that the former is superior by quite a margin. It's only got two polar patterns (cardioid and omnidirectional) but the Yeti Nano more than makes up for it with everything else. Definitely the option to go for if you're desperate for shortcuts.

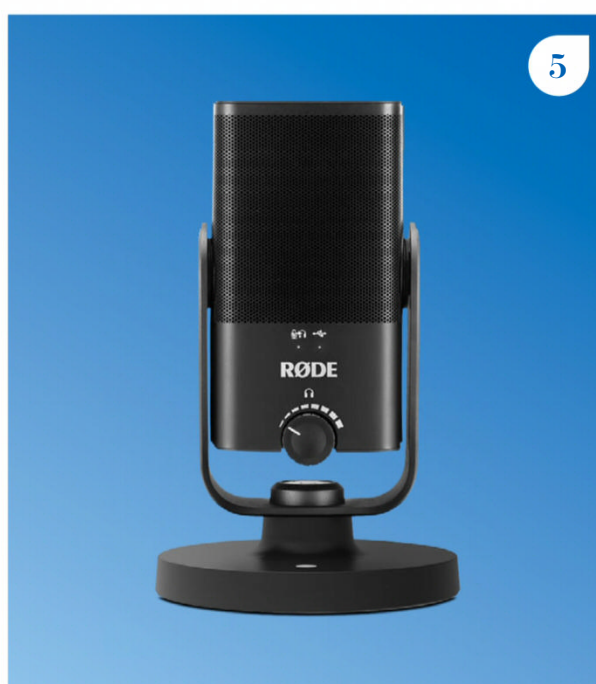
PC GAMER VERDICT

- Very small and light
- Easy to use
- Great sound quality

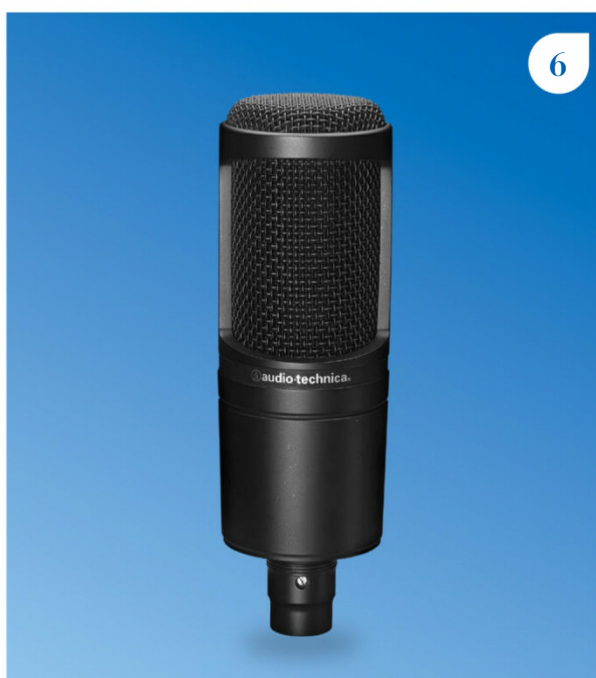
SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID, OMNIDIRECTIONAL / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB / **RECORDING SAMPLE RATE:** 48 KHZ / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20-20,000 HZ / **FEATURES:** ZERO-LATENCY MONITORING



4



5



6

WHAT IS A POLAR PATTERN AND WHICH ONE DO I NEED?

A polar pattern determines how much and from which direction an audio signal will be picked up by a microphone. For gaming, you'll mostly want a pattern that picks up sound directly in front of the microphone (you) and not much else from anywhere else (the environment).

For that you'll want to use the most commonly found polar pattern for gaming microphones: cardioid. This records in front of the microphone and minimises sound from elsewhere. A few popular patterns are:

Bidirectional – captures audio in front and behind of the mic.
Omnidirectional – picks up sound from every direction.
Stereo – perfect for ASMR, if you're into that.

NT-USB-Mini

RODE £86

Multiple USB microphones ahoy!

5 Rode no question makes quality microphones, though with its high-end credentials, prosumer audio often requires a bit of financial investment. Slightly bucking that trend while still being one of the more expensive microphones in this list, the Rode NT-USB Mini makes a name for itself as hands-down one of the best mics you can pick up right now for less than £100.

Aside from sounding incredible, the NT Mini is an easy-to-use mic that any beginner can plug and play. Speaking of easy, the Rode Connect software is a digital mixer that actually

allows for up to four NT Minis to be plugged into a single computer without jumping through any hoops. That's a godsend if you're desperate for a multi-mic setup via USB, which can be tricky at the best of times.

The NT Mini follows the same design philosophy as the other mini mics on this list by being compact and easily transportable. So that's a plus. But most of all, it's a cool-looking and high quality piece of tech.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great sound
- Simple compact design
- Rode Connect software

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** USB / **RECORDING SAMPLE RATE:** 48 KHZ / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20-20,000HZ / **FEATURES:** ZERO-LATENCY MONITORING, MUTE & HEADPHONE VOLUME CONTROLS

AT2020

AUDIO-TECHNICA £89

The cheaper XLR option

6 Audio-Technica AT2020 might be the best cheap XLR microphone you can get your hands on right now. Any professional musician will tell you that trying to find a good XLR mic for less than £200 is a massive chore, yet somehow Audio-Technica manages to provide one for a measly £89. That's pretty cheap by XLR standards. The AT2020 follows the trend of stripping out features to cut costs, though, and that means no mute button. Luckily you still have headset volume and monitor dials, a handy stand mount and a travel bag included in the kit.

Whenever you record yourself using the AT2020, you'll often think you're using a more expensive microphone. And that's what makes it worth it. The AT2020 is a highly versatile microphone, too. Since it is an XLR connection, you will also need to invest in an audio interface. But if you can't be bothered with that, you can pick up the more expensive AT2020USB+, which is the same except it's USB.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Well-built
- Great for musicians too
- Only on polar pattern

SPECS POLAR PATTERNS: CARDIOID / **CONNECTIVITY:** XLR / **FREQUENCY RESPONSE:** 20-20,000HZ / **FEATURES:** STAND MOUNT, CONTROL DIALS, TRAVEL BAG

AI, SALT & BATTERIES

Can artificial intelligence produce a better battery for your laptop?

We are, as a society, addicted to many things. TikTok, Call the Midwife, the easy and free dissemination of information and the purchase and fetishisation of PC parts (just us?)

But there's one thing that, if it vanished overnight, would put us back into the stone age (or at least the 1980s, which is more or less the same thing).

We're talking about the lithium battery. They power our smartphones, our earbuds, our laptops, and increasingly our cars. We use them because of their high energy density and the fact that the chemical reaction that pumps out the volts is reversible, so they can be recharged, but there are a few issues with them – they're not great for the environment, for one thing, as its extraction involves mining salt flats. Up to 70% of the world's lithium is thought to be in a roughly triangular area below Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile, and its extraction sees gallons of water (did we mention this is one of the driest areas of the world?) pumped below the ground to bring salt to the surface, where it's left to evaporate in huge salt pans for months at a time.

Up to 18 months later, once the salt has been filtered enough, you're left with the lithium carbonate, but the by-products include manganese, potassium, and borax, which aren't great if you get them into your water supply.

The extraction of one ton of lithium can use 500,000 gallons of water, a fact that upsets the local quinoa growers and llama herders, and which has left the Bolivian Rio Grande delta drying out.

Lithium is, at least, relatively abundant. The cobalt and nickel also used in batteries come with their own problems, beyond their scarcity. Mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo use child labour to pick cobalt from the ground, and produce 70% of the world's supply. Nickel comes from Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Russia, and the Philippines, and after the Daldykan river turned bright red in 2016, fingers were pointed at the nearby Nadezhda metallurgical factory, a large nickel producer. A spokesman for the company that runs the factory, at the time, denied any involvement and claimed the river was no different to the way it had always been, according to Russian news agency RIA Novosti. Norilsk Nickel would later go on to admit responsibility, blaming heavy rains for a dam overflow.

None of this is good, and it's not going to go away any time soon as we consume more and more lithium batteries in our devices. The good news is that many of the metals used are recyclable when the batteries reach the end of their lives, though this needs political will and investment to implement. But also, research is underway to improve batteries so they use less and less of these environmentally sensitive elements.



Quantum help

IBM Research is also looking into the use of quantum computers to help design new materials for energy storage. Quantum chemistry, however, looks like it will need more powerful quantum computers, or at least more finely tuned algorithms, than are currently available.



Image credit: BMW Group

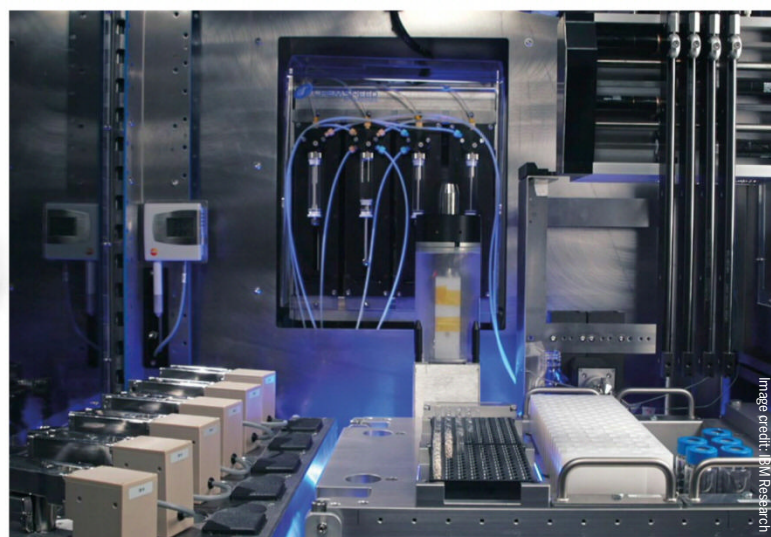


Image credit: IBM Research

FAR LEFT: Battery packs, as seen in the floor of this BMW i3, can take up a great deal of space in an electric vehicle.

LEFT: Part of the AI-powered RoboRXN autonomous lab at IBM. Applications outside batteries include carbon capture and even antiviral drugs.

MINER THREAT *Where the chemicals in your batteries come from*



1 Production of nickel at the PT Vale nickel plant, in Sorowako, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Nickel's atomic number is 28 by the way.



2 A child and a woman break rocks extracted from a cobalt mine at a copper quarry and cobalt pit in Lubumbashi, DRC.



Image credit: Wikipedia

3 Lithium mine at Bolivia's Uyuni Salt Flat, the highest and largest salt flat in the world, seen from the CBERS4 satellite.



Image credit: Wikipedia

4 Lithium is a silvery metal soft enough to cut with a knife at room temperature. It rapidly tarnishes in contact with water, or even moist air.

CHARGING UP

Speaking in a recent webinar, Teodoro Laino, a member of the distinguished research staff at IBM Research Europe, spoke about his work in using AI to build better batteries. "This couldn't be a more exciting time for people who are building software, and for people who are thinking about how to apply their physical schemes on hardware," he said.

"AI, in the last few years, has really taken an important role in the space of material design. We have been using AI for collecting information, and for building models that are capable of predicting hypotheses about new materials – that, at the end, is one of the main advantages of machine learning and data-driven models, they're reasoning on data, identifying correlations, and using those signals to support the experts in the scientific domain in producing new types of materials for batteries.

"AI is also doing something else, and it's really important: it helps us in synthesising those materials." Laino went on to describe his lab, from where he was broadcasting, as the first autonomous lab, connected by the cloud and reachable across the internet. "It's really a chemical laboratory embodied in the cloud," he said.

"Artificial intelligence is really helping accelerate research," Laino continued. "At IBM we call it 'accelerated discovery'. We're taking advantage of artificial intelligence, but also quantum computing and different types of cloud technologies to research and design new materials. We're reducing trial and error as much as possible, and are able to design new materials, better materials, faster and with a more precise specification."

"IT'S A CHEMICAL LABORATORY EMBODIED IN THE CLOUD"

To help him in this, Laino unveiled his robotic assistant, a blend of artificial intelligence, cloud tech, and commercial automation hardware. The primary goal of IBM RXN for Chemistry – think of it as a room full of equipment rather than an android robot – is to use natural language processing to deal with the specific language of chemistry. Think of it as JARVIS before Tony Stark decants him into Vision and you won't go far wrong.

"You can use the same architecture that we use daily to translate between English and Spanish, only train it with chemical data to support the chemist in the design synthesis of new materials. In this lab we are strongly specialised in small organic molecules, and while most of the battery applications are actually solid state rather than organic molecules, here we can design and synthesise molecules that can really make a difference for an energy storage device like

electrochemical flow cells. It's possible to synthesise molecules that have specific redox potential [how easily electrons are transferred into or out of the substance] then optimise this to maximise the output voltage."

We've seen before in these pages that AI can surprise its 'operators' when doing a job that takes humans a long time. Molecular synthesis and the creation of novel materials for energy storage is the perfect example of where a bit of AI creativity could lead to a breakthrough – portable PC batteries that last weeks, or 500 miles on a charge from the lowest-spec electric car. Until then, it's probably time to charge your laptop. ■

Ian Evenden

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

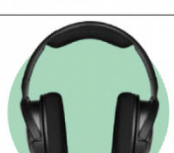
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£600

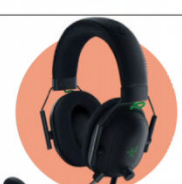
MOTHERBOARD		A320M-A Pro MSI £42 Everything you need and nothing else. This MSI motherboard is simple but it works. And that's all we can ask for at this price.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3400G AMD £130 Capable budget CPU and GPU in one tiny package, and it also comes with its very own CPU cooler.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Spire is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair £39 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master £39 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trusty manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial £57 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 You don't necessarily need a HDD in 2020, but if you're a virtual hoarder, this'll give you loads of useful extra space.
CASE		Neos BitFenix £36 You'll want to minimise how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ £105 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech £40 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech £35 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.
HEADSET		HS35 Corsair £40 This headset delivers in-game with its punchy drivers and clear microphone – perfect for video calls and multiplayer alike.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,438

MOTHERBOARD		B450 Tomahawk Max MSI £120 A reliable platform for your build, the Tomahawk Max also comes in black to complement any style.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 3600X AMD £198 This CPU is one of the greats, and uses the Zen 2 architecture to dominate in gaming and productivity.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £369 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Wraith Spire AMD Free with the CPU We love a freebie, especially one as capable as the cooler included with the 3600X. This'll keep your machine running smoothly.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial £75 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair £93 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink £70 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed – the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £37 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £70 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC £173 Everything a PC gamer could want: Full HD, 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX £80 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious £59 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.
HEADSET		Blackshark V2 Razer £94 The Blackshark V2 offers up some killer audio quality to rival the greats. And at a reasonable price too.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£4,182

MOTHERBOARD		MPG X570 Gaming Pro Carbon WiFi MSI £230 The MSI Gaming Pro Carbon isn't the most lavish X570 going but it's pretty darn close without the ludicrous price tag.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 5900X AMD £549 AMD's latest Zen 3 architecture cruises through the newest games and hands you plenty of cores for CPU-intensive workloads.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia £1,199 The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £123 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.
MEMORY		Vengeance RGB Pro 32GB DDR4 (2x16GB) @ 3,600 Corsair £170 If you truly want to show off, even your system memory should be aglow in RGB.
POWER SUPPLY		SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold EVGA £200 This calibre of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.
SSD		WD Black SN850 1TB Western Digital £151 Western Digital is delivering PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850, making the most of that AMD Ryzen platform.
HDD		860 QVO 2TB Samsung £195 Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to an HDD.
CASE		600C Corsair £135 If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.
DISPLAY		Nitro XV273K Acer £780 This one's an easy choice – 4K and 144Hz for under a grand is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.
KEYBOARD		G915 Lightspeed Logitech £210 Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £110 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £130 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

There's more to the afterlife than horror movie marathons.



“I had to cut someone’s head off with a rusty saw and dig up a corpse”

WarioWare’s fast-paced microgames meet horror film tropes in **SPOOKWARE**

While the *WarioWare* series has never come to our platform (er, understandably), its microgame formula has had its influence on indie PC devs – including Beeswax Games, creators of *Spookware*, a horror-themed collection of bite-sized silliness. The team originally released a smaller version on itch.io, but since then they’ve developed their parade of spooky vignettes into a fully-fledged game, with a full story and cast of characters.

The game kicks off with a trio of skeletons watching TV as you play through an introductory string of rapid-fire minigames on its screen. To progress you need to successfully beat nine of them in a row – and with each one only lasting a few seconds, you have to be quick on the draw. I

RACHEL WATTS



THIS MONTH
Jived with a jazz band full of skeleton folk.

ALSO PLAYED
Toem, *Life is Strange*,
True Colors

had to manically cut someone’s head off with a rusty saw and use a shovel to dig a corpse out of the ground along with a bunch of other gruesome scenarios – all before the stick of dynamite at the bottom of the screen exploded.

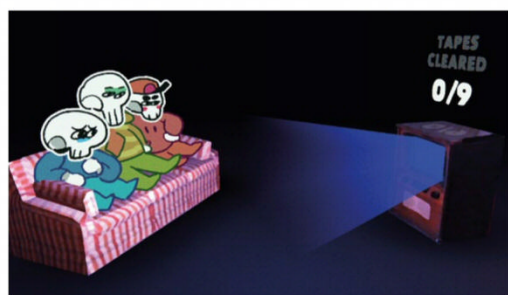
After clearing the end level boss the boney boys on the couch get chatting. I would be pretty happy if the afterlife consisted of watching a never-ending loop of horror films, but *Spookware*’s trio of skelebrots think differently. Tired of lounging on the couch, the three dead brothers decide

to leave their basement and try to live their afterlives to the fullest by going on a road trip.

What follows are different episodes in the trio’s adventure, each story sprinkled with various morbid minigames. Each chapter focuses on a different style of input – the first, for example, focusing on the left and right arrow keys, and becoming increasingly rhythm-based once the brothers join a high school band.

The minigames have a horror twist, but they’re also pretty tongue-in-cheek. The humour seen in the game’s early itch.io days is all over the story. One minigame has me

THE HUMOUR SEEN IN THE GAME’S EARLY ITCH.IO DAYS IS ALL OVER THE STORY

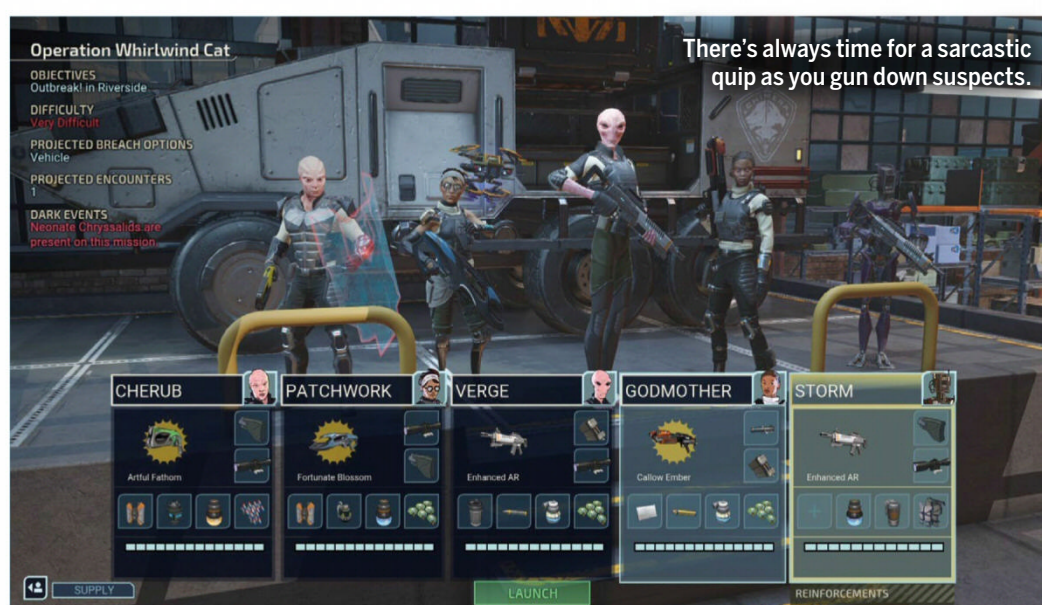


tapping the right and left arrow keys to play bongos in time with a skeleton playing a smooth saxophone.

BONING UP

After graduating high school (having only attended for one day) the skeleton brothers find themselves on a cruise ship for the game's second chapter, where they end up lending a boney hand to helping to solve a murder. The minigames then switch to mouse inputs, and you can pick up pieces of 3D evidence and look it over, *LA Noire* style. There are even minigames where you have to interrogate and present evidence to characters, which was a total surprise and really switches up the game.

I've only just finished chapter two of episode one, but it's already apparent that Beewax Games has figured out a fantastic way of expanding the WarioWare formula – and their original small concept – into a substantial experience, complete with a pleasingly goofy story and lovable characters. The original version had just ten games, while this full version has over 200, together with three chapters in total and a fourth one on the way – so there are plenty of boney boy shenanigans to get stuck into. ■



“Perhaps a prototype for *Midnight Suns*?”

Giving **XCOM: CHIMERA SQUAD** another chance

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Couldn't find the button for
defunding the Chimera Squad.

ALSO PLAYED
Legends of Runeterra,
Iconoclasts

As an *XCOM* obsessive currently on a Marvel kick, I couldn't be more excited for Firaxis' upcoming *Midnight Suns*. But with the game still months off, I'm having to find other ways to satisfy my lust for turn-based tactics.

I never really gave *XCOM* spin-off *Chimera Squad* a proper chance back when it surprise-launched. The more substantial *Gears Tactics* launched around the same time and sucked me in with its novel premise and chunky gunfights. By the time I'd finished that, and was ready to sink some hours into *Chimera Squad*, global protests against police brutality were in full swing, making the game's flippant approach to gunning down alien criminals feel distasteful. I couldn't get through a level without cringing, and quickly put it down.

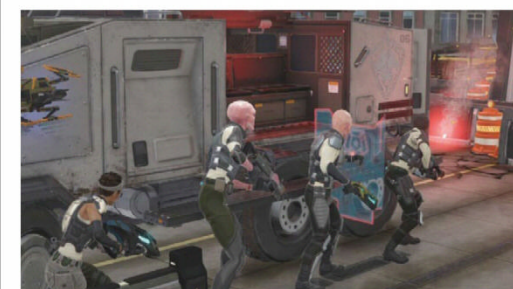
Coming back to it now, it feels like a stepping stone between *XCOM* and *Midnight Suns*, with its team of named agents each boasting superhero-like powers, gimmicks, and codenames. And while I still find the writing awkwardly lacking in self-awareness about its brutal riot-cop

'heroes', its unique take on the *XCOM* formula is fascinating looked at as a possible sign of things to come.

The basic framework is all very familiar, however, the pacing is totally different to past *XCOM* games. By stripping back the experience, and breaking levels down into short, sharp 'encounters', it manages to create a fast, bite-sized version of the *XCOM* experience.

ORIGIN STORY?

It sacrifices some core features along the way – the lack of permadeath and randomly generated soldiers to get attached to definitely sucks some tension out of combat. But overall it does a clever job of distilling *XCOM* into something you can hop into for 15 minutes at a time and feel like you're making progress – instead of getting pulled into hours of 'just one more mission'. It's a little rough around the edges, but it's no mean feat to so drastically change the pacing of a series without losing its magic entirely. And viewed as an experiment on Firaxis' part – perhaps even a kind of prototype for *Midnight Suns* – it's an interesting window into how the studio is trying to rethink and reimagine the genre. ■



“I’m still not sure I’m having fun, but I have spent 30 hours hitting end turn”

Learning the ropes in **TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II**

Total War was my retirement game. I’m sure we all have a series like it. I was going to sit around in a cardigan, reading classic detective novels and pinching castles in *Medieval II*. When I had the time, I was going to spend it getting into strategy games.

But, having grabbed *Total War: Warhammer II* cheap in a sale, I thought I’d get ahead of myself, and carpe the diem. The series has always seemed daunting, but maybe a bit more approachable now it has ratmen and undead ancient Egyptians in it. And besides, there is now an industry of YouTubers telling me how to be good at it.

So I watched the tutorial videos, read the getting started guides, and spent hours tinkering with my gaming laptop so *Warhammer II* wouldn’t overheat it on a clement day. I’m still not sure I’m having fun, exactly, but I sure have spent 30 hours hitting ‘end turn’.

Total War takes a lot for granted, which made it difficult to hurdle into. After an hour or so of helpful tutorial

▶ TOM SYKES



THIS MONTH
Trying to fathom my first *Total War*.

ALSO PLAYED
Quake,
Lara Croft GO

pop-ups – I’ve mainly been playing as the high elf Tyrion, the fantasy equivalent of a cucumber sandwich – I was expected to just get on with it. But get on with *what*, exactly?

I have enjoyed growing my empire and seeing my economy soar. My frame of reference is 4X strategy, to which *Warhammer II* initially felt a bit lacking. Where’s the randomised world, I lamented. But a hundred turns later, I saw the value of that fixed (and beautiful) map. I knew where things were, where the other factions started the game. I knew how I would do it again, but *better*.

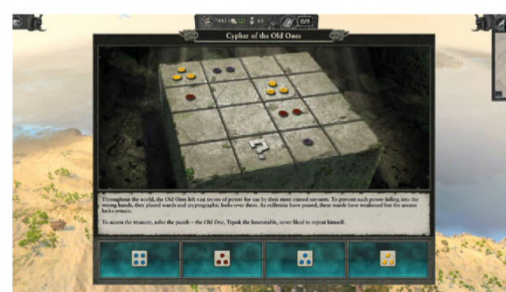
I’LL MASTER THE INS AND OUTS OF WARHAMMER II’S TACTICAL BATTLES ONE DAY

ELF INSPECTOR

In a game with eight billion factions, I probably won’t be restarting as Tyrion. I’ve got Tomb Kings and Skaven and every other outlandish faction waiting. I also want to learn the combat, which frankly feels a bit of a stretch when I’m already juggling multiple provinces and armies.

I’m sure I’ll master the ins and outs of *Warhammer II*’s tactical battles one day, but right now I feel inferior to the auto-resolve, which gets better results and in a fraction of the time. I’m going to persist, because have you *seen* the monster animations? The titanic creatures scatter infantry like bowling pins.

In many ways, this is the fantasy battle game I’ve wanted since watching Ray Harryhausen films as a child – particularly with the Tomb Kings DLC installed. These monsters have character. You can almost see the designers’ thumbprints as they lope across the battlefield to your quivering troops. So, I’ve been playing *Total War: Warhammer II*. More accurately, I’ve been *learning* it. Given how much still lies ahead of me, there may well be some left over for my retirement after all. ■



FAR LEFT: I spent most of my game in the croissant-shaped Ulthuan.



BELOW: Where else can you watch an eagle fight a massive hermit crab?



“You’re not there to reminisce about getting punched to death on a train”

Bemoaning the live-service game-enforced impermanence of **APEX LEGENDS**’ greatest map

There was a pub in Bath called The Hobgoblin that closed in 2017. It was a grungy bar with rock music on the jukebox, and it was the PC Gamer post-deadline haunt for the whole time I edited the magazine. These days, it’s been replaced by an upmarket hotel with a craft beer bar. No thanks.

I’ve started to feel similarly protective about the virtual hangout spaces that have replaced my real ones. *Apex Legends* was my big lockdown game in 2020, and my map of choice in this battle royale was World’s Edge, a volcanic island on the brink of being destroyed by climate change. From the sky, it looked like a theme park: you could explore multiple cities, a tower surrounding a beam of light, volcanic craters and a gorgeous glacier that looked like a frozen explosion of ice. I adored it.

This was the 2020 version of The Hobgoblin for me – only it was a giant PvP map instead of a pub. Certain locations became popular

SAMUEL ROBERTS



THIS MONTH
Got punched in a cloud of smoke caused by Phil Savage.

ALSO PLAYED
Resident Evil 3 Remake,
Last Stop

drop spots for us. World’s Edge had a location that me and my squad referred to as the ‘party boat’ – a floating yacht called Mirage Voyage, where there was music and disco balls. They were so fun.

One non-*Apex* friend enviously said that while he spent the lockdown in his house, my 2020 took place on a party boat. That’s why it really hurt when Respawn removed it from *Apex Legends* last summer as part of a new season patch. World’s Edge looks pretty different in 2021.

I’M NOT USED TO THIS LACK OF PERMANENCE IN THE GAMES I ENJOY, THOUGH

As has become customary in battle royale games, the map has to keep evolving with new places and points of interest, an effort to make the competitive experience as good as it can be while also giving players a reason to see what’s new.

I’m not used to this lack of permanence in the games I enjoy, though. Cyrodiil will always look the same way. The version of World’s Edge that we loved, however, lived for less than a year.

ON THE EDGE

But while it’s obvious to say the grimness of the past two years has heightened our investment in game worlds, there’s a weird tinge of sadness to the idea that the one that got me through a hellish year no longer exists. But hey, World’s Edge is still 70% the same place it was, and it probably is a better competitive map as of Season 10. But like a real hangout spot that no longer exists, the old version lives on as a series of nice memories. You just can’t skydive onto a place hundreds of times without falling in love with it. ■



RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

New update adds Osa, my new favourite attacker. *By Morgan Park*

Following *Rainbow Six Siege* updates has become a tad uneventful since it started releasing only one new operator per season, but if you haven't fired it up in a long while, *Crystal Guard* is the perfect time to come back.

Along with a whole bunch of balancing tweaks to three popular maps, *Crystal Guard* also adds an attacker with an usual new gadget. Her name is Osa, and she carries transparent deployable shields that she can install on any door, window, or open floor. She's essentially an attacker with a defender's gadget, and that makes her very scary for a few reasons. For one, Osa can hold her Talon-8 shields in front of her like a shield operator. She's still vulnerable from the sides, but scouting ahead with a shield in-hand is a useful tactic with teammates backing you up.

BLOCK PARTY

Even more so because Osa is completely protected from the front while deploying the Talon shields, a perk that defenders don't share. This means that Osa can essentially storm into any bombsite, deploy a shield from relative safety, and proudly proclaim "this is my space now". At least, that's how I've been playing her in Osa's first full week in the game, and it's been working out very well. The Talon shields are so fun to use that they've pretty much ruined normal deployable shields for me. I hate trying to peek through those little slits of glass to see if someone's on the other side. I appreciate that Osa's shields leave nothing up to the imagination – you can see me, and I can also see you.

The Talon shield isn't indestructible. It will immediately break on impact with any explosive gadget, same as a normal deployable shield. But even here, Osa has the advantage. Attackers have no shortage of options to blow up a shield: Ash, Zofia, Ace, Kali, Flores,

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE December 1, 2015	DEVELOPER Ubisoft Montreal
PUBLISHER Ubisoft	LINK bit.ly/3t0tnZT

Hibana, and Sledge can all destroy them with their primary gadgets, and then there are frag grenades. Defenders, on the other hand, only have impact grenades and C4. A typical defending team is likely to have or two of each, but they're also

SYNERGIZE ME

The best attackers to pair with Osa



ACE

Deploying an Osa shield on a contentious window can give Ace the opportunity to check for threats and then toss his charges.



HIBANA

Similar to Ace, Hibana's long-range breaching potential raises when she can comfortably challenge windows with an Osa shield.



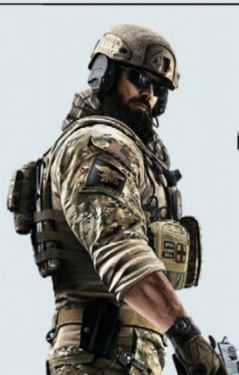
NOMAD

Combo Nomad and Osa to lock down a bombsite with airjab traps and protective shields after the diffuser has been planted.



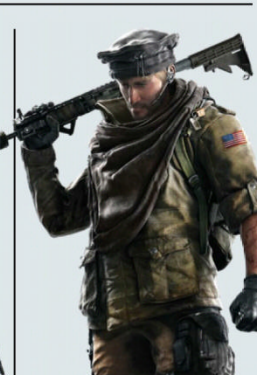
KALI

Osa can tag along with Kali and deploy a shield to give her advantageous angles on windows or in hallways – perfect for sniping.



BLACKBEARD

Blackbeard's rifle shields protect his arms and head, Osa's shields protect his torso and legs. Together, he's totally covered.



MAVERICK

Osa and Maverick don't have much direct synergy, but his blowtorch can be used to destroy shields you no longer need.

likely to use them before Osa ever throws up a shield.

More often than not, defenders will have to find some other way to deal with them, which isn't the end of the world. You can always hop over them (though I wouldn't advise this if you can see a claymore trap on the other side). If you're facing the back of the shield, you can shoot the red canister on its bottom to break it (like Mira's windows). If you'd like to block vision through the shield, meeleing it will crack the glass.

I think it's for the best that the Talon is so durable, because in the end, it's only as useful as the players behind it. Unlike other recent *Siege* gadgets, the shield itself can't deal

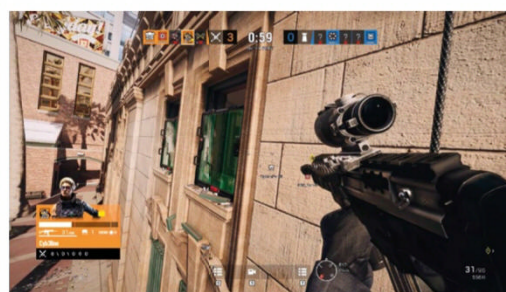
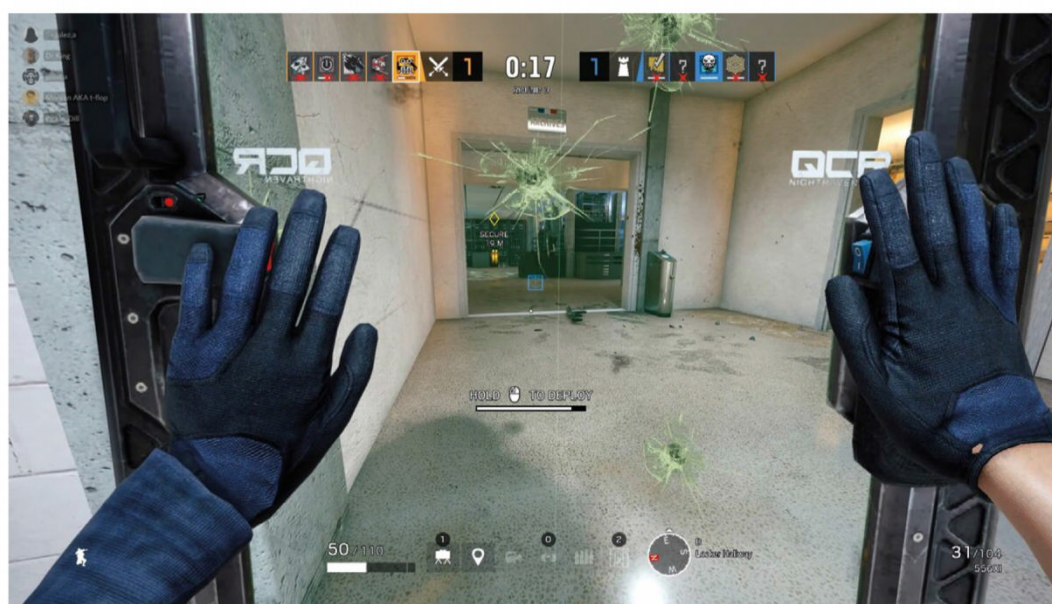
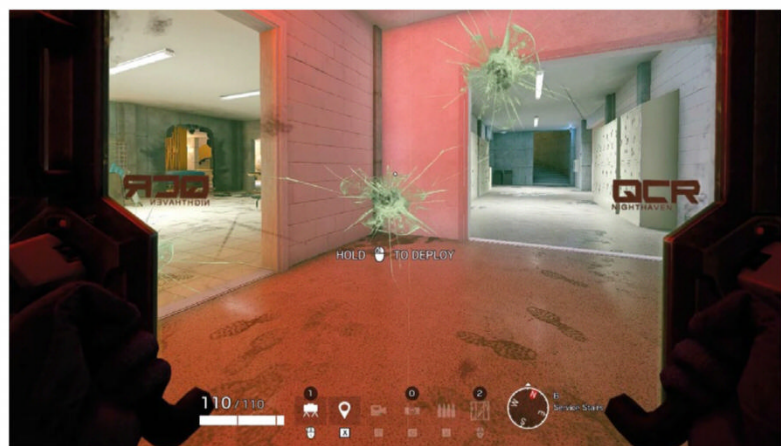


I THINK IT'S FOR THE BEST THAT THE TALON IS SO DURABLE

damage or reveal enemies through walls. It's just a mobile wall – a map modifier that gives attackers exciting new options on every map.

Speaking of maps, some of my old favourites just got a lot better. Coastline, Bank, and Clubhouse received a slew of updates in *Crystal Guard* meant to make more bombsites viable across the board. Those closely-grouped metal bars in the windows and doorways of Bank's vault? Gone and replaced with normal open gaps. That Bar/Storage bombsite on Clubhouse that everyone avoids? Both bombs are now in the bar area with a new doorway to rotate between them. All of those annoying angles on Coastline's skylight that made defending a pain? Now they're blocked, and the barred windows have also been unbarred. Buffing a bunch of maps in smaller ways is certainly less flashy than reworking every corner of a single map, but considering Bank, Clubhouse, and Coastline are three popular maps in Ranked that haven't been touched in ages, I'm glad Ubi took the time on it.

It would be nice to get a new map someday, though. It's been well over two years of map reworks at this point, and with new operators slowing down as well, it's hard not to miss the days of two new ops and a map. Maybe I'll have to wait for *Rainbow Six Siege 2*? ■



FAR LEFT: Osa's shields can absorb infinite bullets, similar to Clash.

LEFT: Frost didn't know what to do about my Osa tactics.



Enemies can benefit from Osa's shields as much as her.

+20
Talon-8 Shield Deployed

50/292
PDW9

See a *No Man's Sky* you've never seen before.



ABOVE: You can't serve drinks, but at least you can decorate.

Make your launch thrusters way more efficient.



NO MAN'S SKY: FRONTIERS

Let's mod the new update. *By Chris Livingston*

Ever since its release in 2016, Hello Games has been working hard to improve and add to its expansive space exploration game *No Man's Sky*. But they're not the only ones. Modders have been working on making the game better, too, and each time a new free update appears for *No Man's Sky*, mods for that update appear shortly after.

Like a lot of people who played *No Man's Sky* on day one, I typically only come back to it when there's a new free update. Sure, the game's galaxy is essentially infinite, but I feel like I've seen a heck of a lot of it by now, so I only return when some new features have been added. The most recent update, *Frontiers*, added a new settlement system, allowing you to find little alien towns on the surface of certain planets, then elbow your way in and take on a role as the settlement's overseer. You can build new buildings, make decisions for your new citizens, and turn a town full of unhappy alien NPCs into a productive and happy little hive.

And even though the settlement system was just introduced in *No Man's Sky: Frontiers* in September, modders have already come up with some improvements for it.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Aug 12, 2016

DEVELOPER
Hello Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
nomanssky.com

The settlement management system is designed to fit in alongside everything else in *No Man's Sky*. The expectation is that you'll spend a little time at the settlement, then fly off and do something else and return a while later. That's why settlement buildings are constructed in stages, with each stage taking hours of real

MODDERS HAVE ALREADY COME UP WITH SOME IMPROVEMENTS

time to complete. And it's why settlement policy decisions or settler disputes only happen about once or twice a day. You're meant to deliver the resources needed to whichever building is under construction, make a decision or two for the settlers about whatever the current issue is, and then jet off and have space adventures while the settlement construction is happening. When something happens at the settlement that needs your attention, you get a notification and can warp on back and deal with it.

SKY'S THE LIMIT

But if you've played a ton of *No Man's Sky* already, you might not really want to jet off and do something else, or log out after each stage of a building's construction and then log back in later. You may want to focus solely on all the new settlement stuff, >>

EVERYONE'S SKY

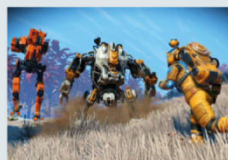
No Man's Sky's updates have added something for just about everyone



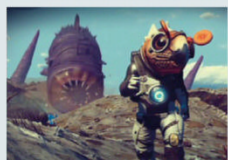
FOUNDATION
Base-building. Make yourself at home in the galaxy.



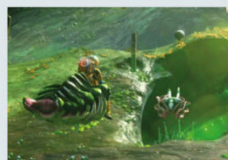
BEYOND
Full multiplayer and a cool public gathering hub.



EXO MECH
As you'd guess, it adds giant stomping drivable mechs.



ORIGINS
A game with a quadrillion planets adds a lot more.



PRISMS
Flying companions. At last you can sit on an alien bug.

» which means all the waiting around is a bit of a buzzkill.

Luckily, if you want to speed through the whole process, there are a few mods already out there that can help. One called *Settlement Fasttrack* and another called *Shorter Settlement Timers* take nearly all of the waiting time out of the building process. Your buildings will be completed in about a tenth of the time it normally takes, meaning you won't have to log out and return later or keep yourself busy doing other tasks

Something else you might notice while playing with the new settlement system is that the NPCs living in your little alien town don't really do all that much. Sure, they walk around, they think their little thoughts, and sometimes they ask to go on expeditions that inevitably end in their deaths. They wave to you or salute when you walk by, and if you build them a nightclub they'll dance next to the jukebox, which is cute. But unless you're making a policy decision or settling a dispute, there's not really much reason to interact with them. They just don't have anything useful to contribute.

But a mod called *No Man's Sky Sci-Fi Fantasy Core*, which was a pretty hefty overhaul mod already, has added a few wonderful new features for settlements. First off, you can actually get missions from your settlers, which is great. These aren't all-new missions scripted just for the mod, they're pulled from other mission collection, so you're really just accessing them from your settlers instead of a planetary archive kiosk or a space station mission board. But if you're going to be spending time managing your settlement anyway, you might as well grab a few missions while you're there, and it makes your NPCs feel a bit more useful.

CITY LIVING

The mod also adds new options for decorating your settlement so you don't have to simply accept the randomised nature of your alien town. The mod lets you access the pool of stationary objects, wall art, interior and exterior decorations, furniture, and other structural bits and bobs to place around your town. It's especially nice that you can add consoles like signal boosters and other gear to your town buildings, which makes the settlement essentially function like a second base. Otherwise, most of the

buildings in your settlement don't have a practical use other than to provide productivity or happiness buffs to your town.

When you're not spending time at your new settlement, you'll also be out gathering resources and zipping around the galaxy, so there might be a few non-settlement related mods you'll be interested in. I spend probably about half my time playing *No Man's Sky* in creative mode, so I'm free to wander the galactic map, check out interesting planets, and buy any cool spaceships I see without having to worry about money, fuel, or getting killed by sentinels or pirates. But in my standard game I deal with all the survival elements, the environmental damage, and resource gathering required to keep myself alive and my ship flying.

Usually I don't mind all the resource gathering and refining that goes along with playing in normal mode, but every so often it does start to feel like a grind, such as when my ship's launch thruster runs out of fuel, which means I have to go shooting rocks with my mining laser so I can blast off. But then sometimes my mining laser is also out of fuel, so I have to punch trees, and whoops, my life support system is down to ten percent. When it all hits you at once like that, it can make a simple takeoff feel like a major pain in the butt.

So it's not a bad idea to cut down on at least some of the endless mining and crafting with the *Reduced Launch Cost* mod. It doesn't remove

the need to refill your launch thrusters completely, it just makes each launch use less fuel so you have to fill-'er-up less frequently. Nice.

FREE SPACE

And while you're out there visiting planets, you should definitely check out the *Better Planet Generation* mod. Like I said, I've been all over the galaxy, and while there's no shortage

BETTER PLANET
GENERATION

ADDS NEW
ENVIRONMENTS

of stunning planets to find, they're all procedurally generated and so they tend to feel, eventually, like you're seeing all the same parts just blended into different combinations.

Better Planet Generation adds new environments and regions to planets, more variety, and additional objects at a greater scale on the planets you visit. Caves and underwater biomes have been overhauled and a new waterworld biome has been added. Forests will feel thicker, denser, and taller. Caverns will feel more enchanting and mysterious. You'll see plant life and rock formations you've never seen before. With this mod, planets just feel more... alien. If you feel like you've gotten a bit used to the sights on the planets, this should freshen things up quite a bit and bring back the sense of excitement to visit new ones.

And while you're out there exploring, you might want your starship to perform a bit better, move a bit faster and control a bit easier at slow speeds. *Dazaster's Ship Flight* has been updated for *Frontiers*, and it'll turn your ship into a precision craft. Not only will your boosts move your ship faster over a planet's surface, but your pulse engine will also increase by a factor of three, letting you zoom between planets and moons at breakneck speed. Your ship also won't leave engine trails when flying, unless you're using the boost, which makes you feel like you're going just that much faster.

You can also make tighter turns, and the handling will feel much sharper and less like you're wrestling with the controls. And with the mod installed you can hover, just like a real sci-fi spaceship should! Finally. ■

SETTLE IN

My settlement is filled with these mostly useless, grumpy Geks



SETTLER UOJEN

I call them: Greenie

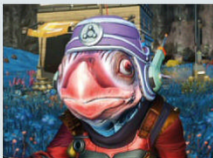
Got in a heated dispute with another settler over a smelly pair of boots.



SETTLER JANERERI

I call them: Hammerhead

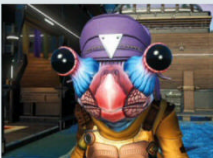
Brought a parasite into my office for reasons unknown.



SETTLER HANIFI

I call them: Grouchy

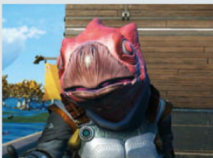
Often "looking for a door to slam" or "resentful about yesterday".



SETTLER FENU

I call them: Bug

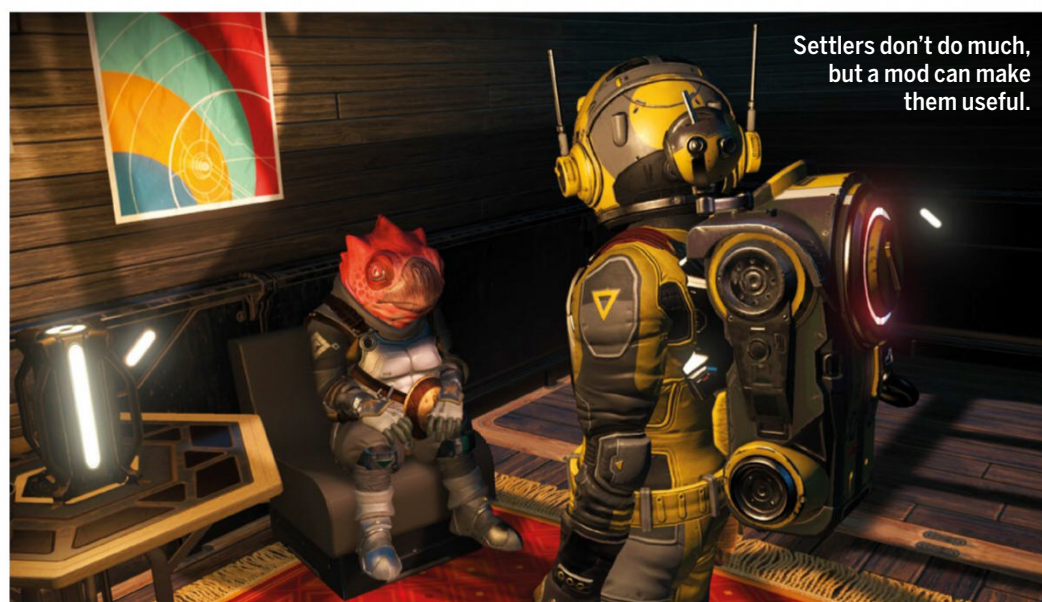
This guy hasn't really done anything yet, but I just think they look like a bug.



SETTLER MUTUD

I call them: The very dead one

Asked to go on an expedition. Never came back.

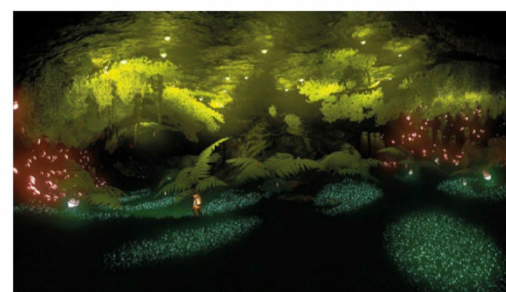


Settlers don't do much, but a mod can make them useful.



FAR LEFT: You'll get this place finished in no time.

LEFT: Find some truly alien environments.



Properly hover, like a real space pilot.



GET STARTED IN FINAL FANTASY XIV

Tips for new and returning players venturing into Eorzea. *By Sarah James*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

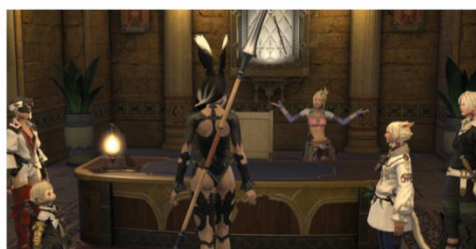
TIME
Ongoing

VITAL LINKS

Races guide:
bit.ly/3kR4yYY

Player housing guide:
bit.ly/3tejdrQ

Glamour guide:
bit.ly/2Vgsigs



STORY TIME

1 The Main Scenario Quests (MSQ) not only follow the main story but give you a helpful chunk of XP too. You want to prioritise these quests in order to unlock dungeons and get your first mount ASAP. They also lead you to level appropriate zones.



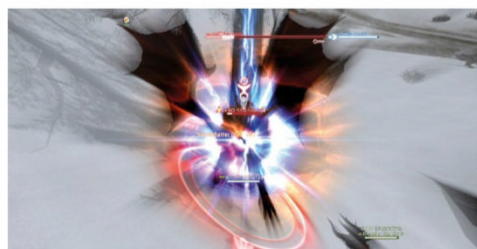
WORLD CLASS

2 You can pick up a class quest every five levels, and they should be second priority after MSQs. They give you some XP and gear, and award you job-specific skills at later levels. Class quests are also the only way to convert a class into a job at level 30.



FREE RIDE

3 You can cut travel costs to frequently visited areas by setting 'Free' and 'Home' destinations at Aetheryte Crystals. The Return feature will teleport you to your Home Aetheryte and you can teleport to your free destination via the teleport list.



PAID LEVE

4 You can use Levequests to level all class types. You have a choice of Battlecraft, Tradecraft, Fieldcraft, and Grand Company Leves, depending on what you want to level. You only get three Leve Allowances every 12 hours, so choose wisely.



POT LUCK

5 Dungeons give you a decent amount of XP, and you get extra Gil, Grand Company Seals, and other useful currency by taking part in the Daily Roulette. This simply means queuing for a random dungeon or Trial you've previously unlocked.



HUNTING GROUND

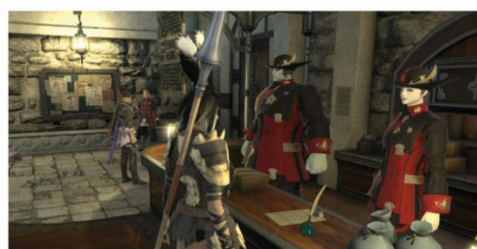
6 The Hunting Log is a great way to earn levels between MSQs and class quests. Essentially, you kill specific enemies to gain chunks of XP. Access it by hitting the 'H' key and work your way through the list.



ROLE REVERSAL

7 You can play every class and role on the same character, so try them out to find one you enjoy. You'll have to level each from level 1, but you can switch easily by saving gear sets in the character menu.

JACK OF ALL TRADES *Level up crafting jobs to become more self-reliant*



RANK AND FILE

8 At a certain point in the main questline, you'll pick a Grand Company to join. Whichever you choose, you should aim to increase your rank to gain various benefits, including the ability to buy player housing once you get to Second Lieutenant.



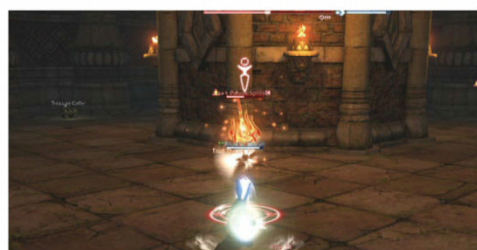
TEMPTING FATE

9 Fates are short events that pop up in various areas and offer extra XP, Gil, Grand Company Seals, and occasionally, items as a reward. Their level scales to match the area they appear in, so they can be an excellent way to get big chunks of XP.



TAKING A SIDE TRIP

10 There are plenty of sidequests dotted around Eorzea. While these have no direct bearing on the main story, they can help add context to areas and NPCs you encounter. These are also a handy source for XP when levelling another class or job.



CRYSTAL PALACE

11 The Palace of the Dead is a constantly changing dungeon that can be a useful and more varied way of levelling a second class or job up to level 60. You gain access to it once you complete the MSQ that takes you into Copperbell Mines.



LOOKING GOOD

12 The Glamour system lets you use the appearances of gear you like on the equipment you're wearing, providing your class can equip it. You can also dye your gear, so there's no excuse not to look your best.



DIARY

PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN GAMES

EAST MOVES WEST, MOVES
BACK EAST AGAIN IN

TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II

PART II

Our intrepid dwarf rangers return to a home they no longer recognise. *By Matt Elliott*

The gods are angry at me. Specifically, the implacable interstellar toad wizards in charge of the lizardmen. They haven't taken kindly to my dwarf rangers appearing out of nowhere, declaring war on them, and occupying the settlement of Fallen Gates, like wrong-aspect-ratio football hooligans rocking up to Marmaris then bunkering up in an English theme pub. It could spell the end of this diary before it even begins.

Last time, intrepid brothers Yadri and Dramar Growlsh successfully crossed the Old World to colonise the western edge of the map. But 'successfully' is misleading. It ended up being a desperate, last-ditch scramble that saw me lose the sacred dwarf capital, Karaz-a-karak. At the time I didn't think too deeply about lingering questions like how I'd get back to my home or survive a counterattack by Hexoatl, my cold-blooded lizardman enemies.

I can now answer the second bit: by fleeing. I have a depleted army. Just one feeble settlement. And I can barely afford to maintain my forces. If my hostile lizardman neighbours attack me, it'll be the end of my clan and campaign. So despite it taking me over 100 turns and an entire diary, I abandon Fallen Gates, leaving it for Hexoatl as a peace offering, like the last good chocolate in a selection box.

I move northeast to the abandoned settlement of Ss'ildra Tor – a place that sounds like living in a snake, with a climate my dwarfs despise. Everyone is miserable, and it's still not far enough away from Hexoatl, who, it turns out, aren't especially forgiving, even after getting the last chocolate. I frantically research dwarven diplomats to help repair our shattered relationship, but it's like learning veterinary science after you've already tumble-dried the hamster.

A NEW HOPE

But then, I spy it: the Promised Land, Part II. I find another abandoned settlement, nestled between mountains, far away from unreasonable reptiles. Colonising an empty location means I don't need to worry about defeating a garrison, and the wasteland setting is

comfortable for my race. The only downside is the uninspirational name: the Plain of Dogs. After scouting it out with my runesmith, Dramar, I move my expedition north again. I'm hemmed in by the high elves of Nagarythe, but relations are cordial and we leave each other alone. The next few turns are both boring and nerve-wracking, waiting to see if I can survive long enough to stabilise my campaign.

FRIEND ZONES

It feels great to be secure again, but it's no way to live. There's limited scope for conquest here, and Grimgor's 'Ardboys, the greenskin faction who stole my capital, are

EVENTUALLY, EVEN THE LIZARDMEN OF HEXOATL JOIN THE SHIELD OF CIVILIZATION

back in the Old World, leagues away from fiery vengeance. I decide to go home and put right everything that went wrong. It won't be easy, though. I'm essentially starting again, 100-plus turns into the game. All my enemies will have high-tier armies and I'm basically broke. Just as I'm beginning to wonder how I'll ever make it back, the strangest opportunity presents itself: the forces of Chaos invade from the north. The threat of being steamrolled by Archeon and his dick friends unites dwarfs, humans, elves, and lizardmen. In my head, I imagine heavy fists thundering on the gates of the Plain of Dogs and the ragged form of High King Thorgrim Grudgebearer stumbling into my settlement to demand we return home and settle the grudges. Perhaps we march to our doom; yet march we must.

We pack our things, leaving a small garrison at the Plain of Dogs. Thorgrim's army takes the underway through the lands of the dark elves – who, miraculously, have more chill than their woodland kin – and we leave the New World behind. I can only afford one army, so Yadri takes a break while Thorgrim leads. I feel bad for him, but the image of a defeated king marching to his probable death feels too grimly dwarvish to resist.

The world changes during my journey. The Chaos incursion taints everything with a sense of desperation, which I happily use to my advantage. Alliances with dwarfs come fast and often – gromril shields locking to form a bulwark against the Ruinous Powers. The umgi Emperor Karl Franz offers a military alliance. Bretonnia, too. Eventually, even the lizardmen of Hexoatl join the Shield of Civilization, probably swayed by the fact I gave them back Fallen Gates (that, and the menacing spectre of complete destruction). Only the Wood Elves stay frosty, making my dwarf faction look reasonable and forgiving by comparison. With that in mind, I avoid Athel Loren, and instead range south past Carcassonne, into lands teeming with skaven. I hurry past Skavenblight, through the

THE RULES

1. My lord must travel from Mount Silverspear to the Fallen Gates.

2. My army can't be led by a special character.

3. My capital, Karaz-a-Karak, must survive.



The High King leads the attack on Karag Orrud.

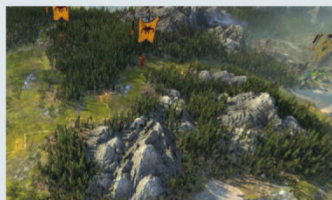


ARCHA-GONE? *Five places the Everchosen of Chaos might have disappeared to*



ALBION

Yes, it's a primitive, gloomy land of perpetual drizzle and barbarians. But also: henges!



ESTALLIA

Warm weather, abundant seafood, cheap housing... and a major rat problem.



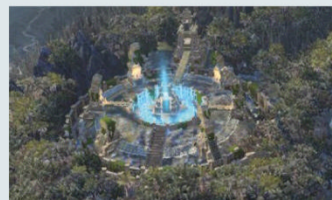
BRETONNIAN

Perhaps Archaon came to the land of knightly virtue for a sampling of its fine wines?



THE MOOT

Basically the Shire. Why make war when you can have second breakfast and smoke pipeweed?



THE FALLEN GATES

Don't bother, pal. Surly locals, horrible climate. It's honestly not worth the trip.

» mountain pass that leads to Myrmidens, the capital city of the Border Prince Confederacy. For the first time in more turns that I can remember, I see the World's Edge Mountains, and *home*. However, a new problem immediately presents itself.

The power vacuum my absence has caused has broken the map. Where normally this area is an arena of ebbing conflict between dwarfs and greenskins, the migration and near destruction of my faction has left room for growth and colonisation by two usually-distant factions: Clan Angrund, who've travelled east to retake Karak Eight Peaks, and Reikland, the human faction led by the Emperor Karl Franz. I expected to take my pick of lightly-defended Greenskin outposts, but they're nearly all occupied by allied races. Including – and this feels sickening to write – my capital, Karaz-a-karak.

GOING UP

The fact humans are living in my racial capital is a problem. If it were greenskins I could, eventually, evict them. But Reikland is one of my strongest allies. They're the force holding Chaos back, and my absence – not to mention *Warhammer II's* more forgiving climate system – has given them space to expand south. They're also absurdly powerful, so attacking them is wrong from both a moral and strategic standpoint. I decide Karaz-a-karak can wait – for now, it's in safe, soft, unskilled human hands. Instead, I focus on the other part of my goal: destroying Grimgor. But first off, I need a place to live.

The problem is my allies have been too efficient. The only place left is a wasteland in the Badlands occupied by Grimgor's 'Ardboyz, called Floating Village, because it's a village that literally floats. In the lore, it was created by a mad, long-dead sorcerer, and it rises to the sky during the day and returns to the ground at night. It's the most un-dwarfy place to live I can imagine. I might as well be moving into Multicultural Forgiveness Grove. But it's also portentous: in *Age of Sigmar*, the tabletop game that takes place in the future after the destruction of *Warhammer II's* fantasy world, some dwarfs take to the skies in airships when their mountain holds are overrun. Perhaps it all started in Floating Village.

Thankfully, the surrounding area is relatively safe. Combined efforts of dwarfs and humans have pushed the greenskins to the edge of the map. I'm still relatively weak, so I make regular use of war coordination: a slightly cheesy strategic option that lets me tag potential targets for my muscular allies. I like to think of it as the High King marshalling the war effort from afar, rather than what it actually is: me watching them do the hard work so I can sweep in and take key settlements for myself. Weirdest of all, the Reiklanders don't seem that busy with Chaos: Archeon is still alive, apparently, but I can't see him anywhere.

GOBLIN UP LAND

I decide to take the Greenskin capital city, as recompense for the fall of Karaz-a-karak. I'm prepared for a long wait.

My army is still low-tier, and my income is feeble. But then I notice that Grimgor's capital, Karag Orrud, is nearby, and it's weakly defended. I range southeast to the volcanic dwarf hold, calling in more reinforcements from Clan Angrund to make life easier. Grimgor's capital falls, but it's unsatisfying. I want more. I push south, taking more of Grimgor's lands, meeting Karak Zorn in the process, a legendary lost dwarf faction I didn't know existed. It's around now I realise that this is what I was looking for all along. I went west to find the promised land, but here, on the southernmost tip of the World's Edge Mountains, is an area I could learn to love: solid dwarf holds, nestled snugly among strong stone, with lush green forests above and precious resources below. Karag



The smell of burning goblin: my new favourite cologne.



I SWOOP IN AND RECLAIM LOST HOLDS IN THE NAME OF THE HIGH KING

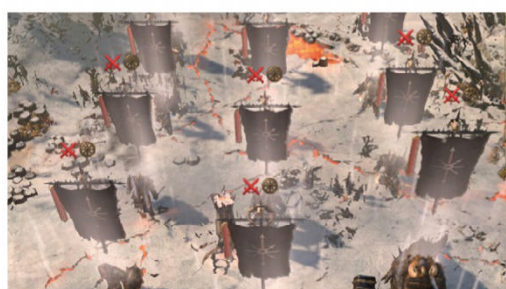
Orrud even has some high-tier building chains that let me hire engineers and significantly improve my artillery with Irondrakes, organ guns, and engineers. After 200 turns of being chased and harangued, I'm finally having my third act moment where I clench my fist, turn around slowly and growl, 'never again'.

But just as I'm ready to move into the empty dwarf hold and secure the entire province, another weird thing happens: a roaming wood elf faction moves in next door. Not content with declaring war on me, not joining the war against Chaos, and generally being capricious, thicket-hugging wastrels, they now have to go and get bark and moss and tree-sap all over an honest dwarf hold. As well as stopping me from controlling the whole province, it makes me feel like I'm trapped in a high fantasy, Odd Couple-style sitcom. Damn my leafy neighbours! The only positive is that it makes my eastern flank secure, because any Greenskin armies have to get past the horrid tree men.

The reconquest begins. From my new mountain hold I expand north and northwest, working with Clan

Angrund and Reikland to wash Grimgor's filth away. It's great for me, terrible for Clan Angrund. As they lose their grip on the province of Blightwater I swoop in and reclaim lost holds in the name of the High King. It's the most secure I've been, and my treasury is full. One by one, Grimgor's settlements fall. I destroy the last one I can see on the map, finger poised to screenshot the 'faction destroyed' message. Nothing. When I check the diplomacy screen, I can see that he has six settlements left – I just have no idea where they are. I send scouts past my wood elf neighbours and, again, discover a massive area of the map I didn't realise existed. Worse still, the elves have failed at their one job, and the orcs are resurgent. What follows is a strategic tug of war. I raze two of their settlements, they take one of mine. But despite pirate attacks, rebellions and beastman hordes, I manage to slowly choke the life out of Grimgor.

I'm close to completing my goal when disaster strikes: Yadri falls defending Deff Gorge from a greenskin army. I'm sad enough that I consider save-scumming to get him back, but it's too poignant an end. After doing everything his king asked of him, my brave Dwarf Lord died in his homeland, defending his brothers from their most hated foe. I rename Deff Gorge 'Karak Growlsh' to remember the dwarf who conquered the far side of the world, but didn't live long enough to see his king's ultimate victory – something so perfectly tragic there must be a Khazalid word for it. ■



TOP: A new disappointing place to live.

LEFT: The only time anyone's been glad to see Archaeon.



WHY I LOVE

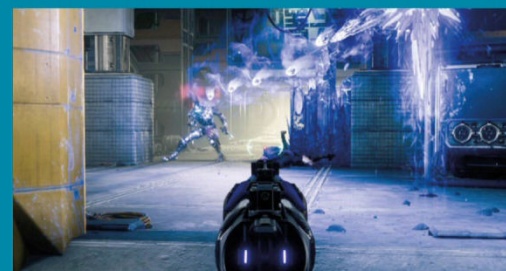
WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

FREEZING EVERYTHING WITH STASIS IN DESTINY 2

The Bleak Watcher is my new best friend. *By Phil Savage*



LEFT: *Destiny's* menagerie of hostile aliens aren't as threatening when they can't shoot back.



Destiny 2's most recent expansion, *Beyond Light*, added a new element type for the first time in the series' history. Joining the Light trifecta of Solar, Void and Arc, came the first of the Darkness elements: Stasis. In layman's terms, it's ice, allowing players to freeze and be frozen in turn. Its impact was instantly felt, but its ultimate potential is only just now being realised.

Stasis dominated PvP for the months after *Beyond Light*'s release. At a competitive level, *Destiny 2* is as much about movement and positioning than pure aim. The ability to outright freeze another player wrought havoc on the sandbox. The patch notes for the inevitable nerfs were revealing. "While the Shadebinder may not be the most powerful in competitive play," wrote Bungie of the Warlock's Stasis subclass, "being frozen by its abilities takes a large emotional toll on the victim." Stasis was spreading bad vibes – fitting for our first taste of Darkness powers, but damaging for the game at large.

I love inflicting a large emotional toll, and *Destiny 2*'s PvE provides a safe space in which to do that. If the Fallen's dregs are crying about the Winter's Wrath ranged melee freeze being OP, nobody at Bungie is listening. In fact, throughout the year Stasis only grew more potent as each season brought a new suite of new aspects – equippable upgrades that are unique to each class – and fragments – passive bonuses that are available to all. The best of the aspects is Bleak Watcher, exclusive for the Warlock class and introduced

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 24, 2017

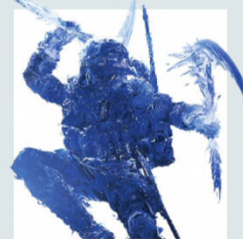
DEVELOPER
Bungie

PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
destinythegame.com

FREEZE FRAME

Destiny 2's Stasis subclasses explained



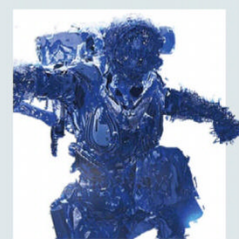
CLASS:
HUNTER
SUBCLASS:
REVENANT

A terror in PvP thanks to Shatterdive. Ice tornados are cool too, I guess.



CLASS:
TITAN
SUBCLASS:
BEHEMOTH

The Super used to last for weeks. You could tank a sniper headshot, no worries.



CLASS:
WARLOCK
SUBCLASS:
SHADEBINDER

Ice wizard! The turrets are great, and you get to take an "emotional toll" on people.

in Season of the Chosen. With it equipped, players can charge up their grenade to turn it into a Stasis turret. It's good: with a Bleak Watcher on the field, the player can dispatch frozen trash mobs, focus down minibosses, or find a moment's respite to heal and re-engage.

It also demonstrates the flexibility of Stasis theorycrafting. If one Bleak Watcher is good, many are better, and so my objective is to recharge my grenades as quickly as possible to

IT ALSO DEMONSTRATES THE FLEXIBILITY OF STASIS THEORYCRAFTING

ensure constant uptime. As such, the Whisper of Torment fragment is a no brainer – it grants grenade energy whenever I take damage. Beyond that, though, I have to start getting creative. Whisper of Refraction grants class ability energy for each frozen enemy killed. That means I can place my Warlock rift more often, which, when paired with the armour mod Bomber, reduces my grenade cooldown in turn.

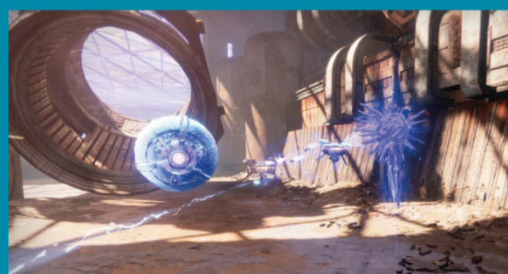
STASIS UPDATE

Let's push it even further with some Charged With Light mods. Added post-Shadowkeep, Charged With Light was meant to be a seasonal, temporary mod system that is now a permanent addition, albeit one that is never explained in-game. Adding it to your build requires two different mods: one to earn the buff, and another to spend it. Using Taking Charge, I can become Charged With Light by picking up Orbs of Power – which drop liberally when using fully masterworked weapons. Then I can use the Firepower mod to spend those stacks, granting me grenade energy whenever I use said grenade.

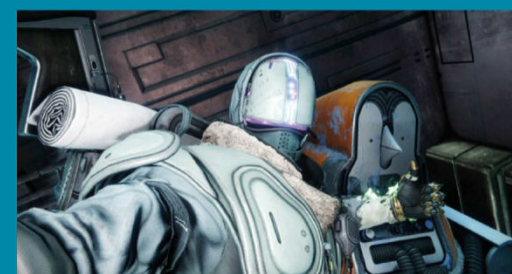
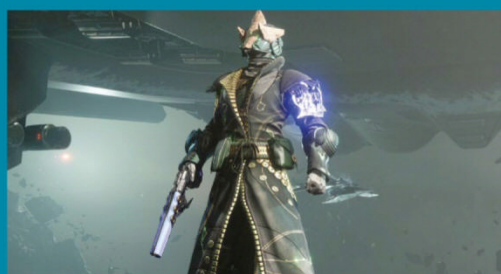
We're not done yet. Stasis theorycrafting came to a head this season with the release of the first legendary Stasis weapons. These offer unique perks that can further synergise with Stasis fragments. Take the new Vulpecula handcannon, which can roll with the perk Headstone. It generates stasis crystals on precision kills, which means I can pair it with Whisper of Shards, which boost my grenade recharge when I shatter them.

The result is absurd room clearing potential, with each element of my build – from exotics, to abilities, to mods, to fragments – all specced to lower grenade cooldown. With the engine running at full power, I can be placing my third turret before my first has even expired, arguably trivialising most of the game's activities. But that's fine: it's the reward for pushing a build as far as it can go, and engaging with every part of the game's systems.

Next year Bungie will go through and update the old Light subclasses to utilise this new system of aspects and fragments, hopefully unlocking the same extreme customisation options for our original suite of powers. Finally, *Destiny 2* has realised the potential and power of its systems, and I'm happy to revel in the power fantasy that it brings. ■



RIGHT: Bleak Watcher builds are great if you want to attempt difficult missions like Presage solo.





REINSTALL

OLD GAMES, NEW PERSPECTIVES



**You feel each footstep as
you kick up to speed**

Jump for your life.



MIRROR'S EDGE

Taking a leap of Faith with the queen of parkour. *By Nat Clayton*

You don't often think about running in games, do you? Hold W to go forwards, maybe tap shift if you're really hoofing it. Then there's *Mirror's Edge*, a game so committed to putting you in the free-running shoes of leading lady Faith Connors that you can practically feel the soles wearing out with each jump, slide, and wallrun. Parkour might not be as cool now as it was in 2008, but over a decade later, Faith is still running circles around the competition.

Mirror's Edge is a first-person parkour-'em-up from *Battlefield* creator Dice, who briefly put the guns away to make a game where running away was as dense and satisfying as any FPS gunfight. It's a game about running and vaulting and

sliding your way across rooftops at blistering speed, even if the occasional naff brawl puts the brakes on things every now and then.

I've always been a sucker for good movement. *Jet Set Radio Future* set the template as far as I'm concerned, its cel-shaded skates kicking off a lifetime's fascination with the ways games tackle traversing a 3D space – be it trying to master *Quake*'s bunnyhops, to conserving speed through a tactical buttslide in *Apex Legends*. Games where you could strip out everything but the character controller and still have fun running and jumping and sliding around.

But *Mirror's Edge* has a physicality to it that hasn't really been matched before or since. You are Faith, in a tangible, meaningful way. Plenty of games show you your characters legs when you look down, but *Mirror's Edge* gives you such a powerful sense

of what Faith's body is doing with each move. Her hair even sways with the wind, a needlessly frivolous effect considering you never leave a first-person perspective, and yet grounds you as a physical entity within the world.

You feel each footstep as you kick up to speed, and feel the weight of her body as you bounce off walls and vault over pipes. Where *Titanfall*'s wallruns are fast and effortless, *Mirror's Edge* forces you to feel the gravity of the physics-defying reality of sprinting sideways.

Mastering Faith's movements takes real work, and I found myself stumbling over every step and ledge. But it didn't take long for the muscle memory to kick in. See, back in school, a pal and I used to race each other across the game's rooftops, spending weeks at a time shaving fractions of a second off each other's paces on just the first time trial map.

We were speedrunning, long before I was really conscious of what

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2008

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

DEVELOPER
Dice

LINK
bit.ly/3yZxHGt



There's no cooler feeling than sliding down a skyscraper.

» speedrunning was, and a few levels into this revisit all the old tricks came rushing back. The sidestep jump that pulls you from a standstill to a full-speed sprint. The cheeky wee kick at the end of a wallrun to give you a few frames of coyote time. *Mirror's Edge* is crammed with techniques that blur the line between intended play and full-on, boundary-breaking speedrun strats.

Getting good at running also helps you avoid the game's infrequent shootouts, which flatly aren't great. Yes, I adore that your embodiment of Faith means guns do feel awkward in

her hand (she's a runner, not a soldier), but *Mirror's Edge* is ultimately not brave enough a game to forgo fighting entirely – and when scraps happen, they're a clumsy mix of awkward first-person brawling and haphazard shooting.

URBAN FLIGHT

That shooting is joined by the game's story as aspects of the game that feel sorely lacking. *Mirror's Edge's* plotting feels like an afterthought, a wholly uninspiring conspiracy told through animated cutscenes that feel rushed and disconnected. Your cop

sister's been framed for murder, see, and in trying to clear her name Faith gets roped into a tangle of corporate scheming to take over the city's police force. *Mirror's Edge* has a neat set-up with its illegal, free-running Deliveroo gangs, but never really does anything interesting with it.

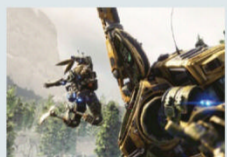
Here's the thing: I think *Mirror's Edge* is probably the best *Matrix* videogame to date. Think about it. You're sprinting through hallways and rooftops across a sprawling, non-distinct city, fleeing faceless cops at every turn. You have your very own operator guiding you through each job, telling you exactly which alley to turn down and which door to punch through to best evade the law. There's even a wee bit of bullet time, though it mostly operates as a tool to make disarming cops a little easier.

As cool as she is though, it's the city, not Faith, that's the main character of *Mirror's Edge*. Never named, vaguely American but geographically impossible to pin down, the city has such a sterile sense of character. I can't stress enough how good this leaves *Mirror's Edge* looking, a vibrant art direction lending its city a timeless look.

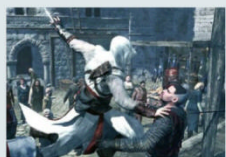
The story might be clumsy, but you don't need characters and

RUNNING BUDS

Stretch your (digital) legs with these athletic alternatives



TITANFALL 2
The gold standard for game movement. Think *Mirror's Edge* with the limiters turned off, featuring the undisputed king of buttslides.



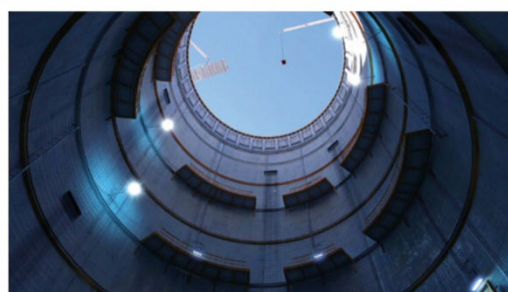
ASSASSIN'S CREED
Ubisoft's free-running might be simplistic, but there's joy in bounding entire cities in seconds.



GHOSTRUNNER
Prefer your wallrunning in a more cyberpunk flavour? *Ghostrunner* even gives you a sword so you can slash while you dash.

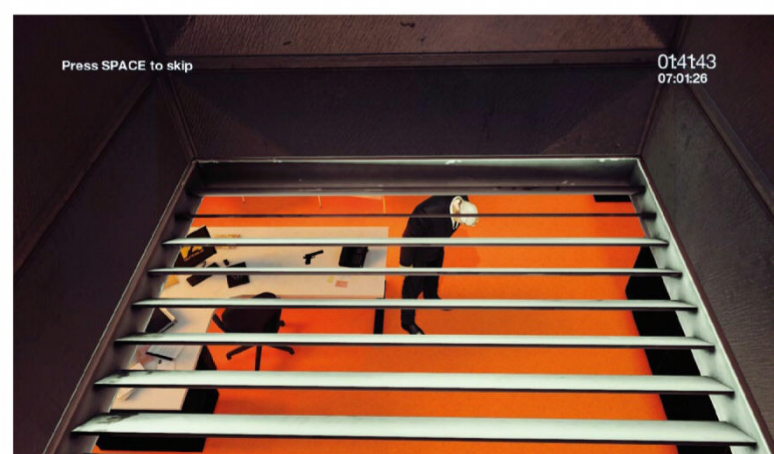
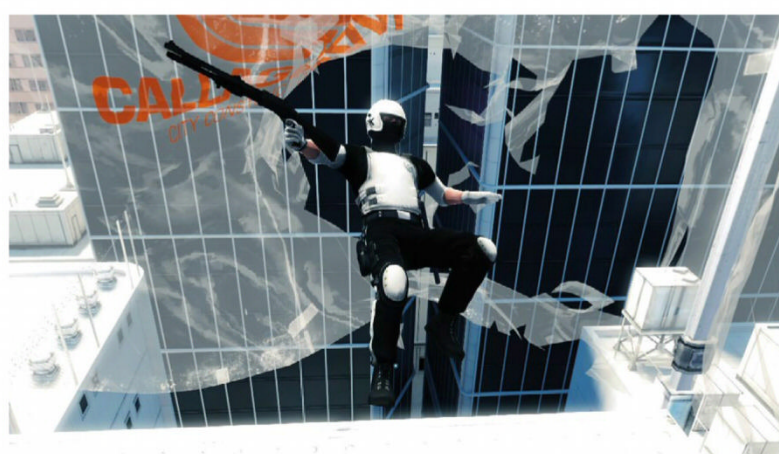


MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST
As much as I've bashed it, *Catalyst* is still a strong parkour sandbox – one that plays a little nicer with modern PCs.



RIGHT: What happened to PhysX, anyway?

FAR RIGHT: Faith joins a time-honoured tradition of lurking in vents.



dialogue to tell that this is a deeply post-9/11 world of encroaching surveillance and rampant privatisation. A dystopia painted in clean white concrete, broken only by stark, garish signs for energy drinks and private security firms.

Corporate hellscape is hardly new for cyberpunk. But *Mirror's Edge* never quite crosses that line into being true cyberpunk, modelling its architecture off 20th century high-rises and more contemporary monstrosities. It avoids a trap its own sequel fell into, with *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst*'s City of Glass offering a more fantastical metropolis – one that's so sparkling and clean that you never get the sense the city was anything other than brand new.

As you descend through concrete canals and back alleys, *Mirror's Edge*'s city gives you a strong sense that there used to be something here. At least, before the city council stumbled upon a warehouse full of white paint.

REDLINE

That starkness serves a purpose too. One of *Mirror's Edge*'s smarter ideas was 'runner vision' – and while the name implies a *Witcher* or *Arkham*-esque mechanic that desaturates the screen, highlights interactive objects

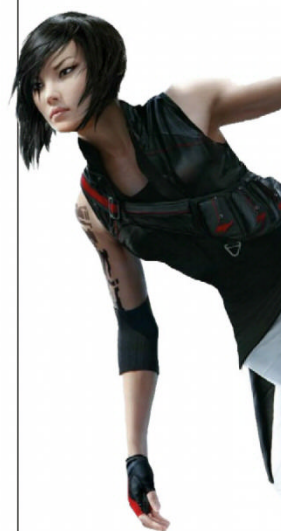
MIRROR'S EDGE NEVER QUITE CROSSES THAT LINE INTO BEING TRUE CYBERPUNK

and maybe slows down time, Dice chose a more subtle approach.

Instead, runner vision applies a sharp red tint to your path through a level, screaming against the desaturated whites and greys of the rest of the map. Which door to open, which pole to climb, while box to spring-jump off. It allows the game's levels to be dense without leaving the player utterly lost. Can't work out where to go? Just follow the red.

Runner vision can be turned off, of course, but it's important to note that while runner vision will guide you down the most direct path, it's often not the fastest. It's always worth keeping an eye out for riskier routes that might shave seconds off your time. A long pole climb might be averted by wall-bouncing off an exterior vent onto a series of AC units, and only a chump would use the stairs when there's a perfectly precarious fence to hop.

Mirror's Edge's neighbourhoods are dense with this kind of detail,



with time trials reworking even the smallest blocks into complex parkour playgrounds. It might take seconds to sprint across a few rooftops to the RP&A building in the game's first chapter, but you'll spend hours trying to complete a loop around just one of those building's billboards.

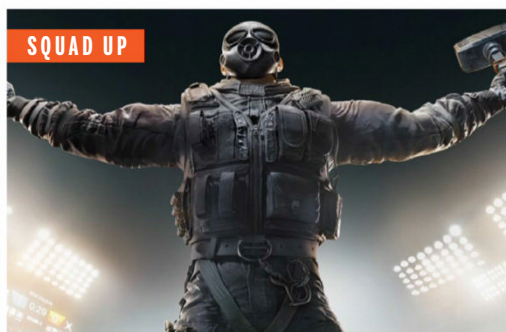
It works because, fundamentally, *Mirror's Edge* is still linear. The idea of an open city where you could free-run anywhere is still tempting, even now, but it's this guiding that keeps Faith's movements feeling fast and tight. Every jump, every wall, every fence has to be carefully considered. Every level gets to find its own route without trying to fit within a greater urban structure.

Catalyst made *Mirror's Edge* busier. Not only with an open world, but with progression trees, fussier combat, a wider cast of characters and more stakes. But *Mirror's Edge* never needed any of that fuss.

It's a game about running, pure and simple. About hearing the wind rush past your ears as you pound ground, carving a route through a concrete jungle. It's expression through movement, an encapsulation of what traversal in 3D space can mean. This runner might be old, but they're still the best in the game. ■

MORGAN
PARK

Writing under the squelching hot California sun. Always waiting for the next great FPS or immersive sim. In the meantime, I've compiled some of the best.



RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

bit.ly/3z06XF0

→ Almost six years into its run, this is still the best competitive shooter around. Nothing quite matches *Siege*'s blend of shooting, destruction, and gadget meta. Ubisoft holds regular free weekends for *Siege* these days, but you'll also find it on sale for less than \$10.



HUNT: SHOWDOWN

bit.ly/3lir5y3

→ *Hunt: Showdown* is what I wish every battle royale game was. It doesn't have a circle, but it does have a supremely fun arsenal of 19th century guns, incredible sound, and some of the best maps I've ever seen in a multiplayer game. Don't sleep on this masterclass of design.



RECEIVER 2

bit.ly/3z15gb3

→ *Receiver 2* is an FPS roguelike, except your guns are fully simulated. Everything from pulling the hammer, removing magazines, and flipping on the safety is its own button to learn. You'll find out quickly that reloading a pistol while dodging gunfire is way harder than games make it look.



SNOWRUNNER

bit.ly/394XNxj

→ When I'm done shooting stuff in videogames, I like to unwind in the most satisfying driving sim around. *Snowrunner* is sorta like *Death Stranding* without the bullshit and with 1,000% more trucks. If *Euro Truck Simulator* puts you to sleep, you'll find a proper adventure here.

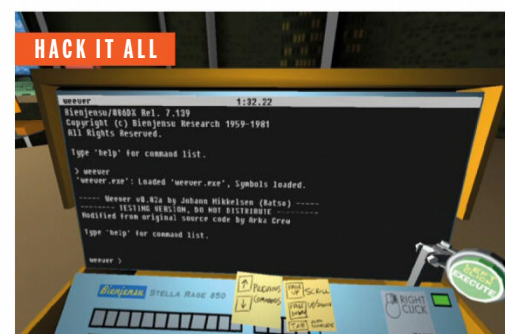
MUST



PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Morgan Park



QUADRILATERAL COWBOY

bit.ly/3lmJqdz

→ *Quadrilateral Cowboy* is a short puzzle game that effectively explores the hacker heist fantasy. Armed with a computer deck, a rudimentary programming language, and sick gadgets, QC asks players to think like a coder to solve puzzles and feel cool as hell while you're at it.



PREY

bit.ly/3k1W5mG

→ Arkane took the best of *Dishonored* and blasted it with a *System Shock*-inator – what's not to love about *Prey*? The Talos 1 space station is one of the best videogame worlds out there and I consistently find new ways to complete missions on every new playthrough.



SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

bit.ly/3A5Eobi

→ One of the best stealth games you can play right now released in 2005. *Chaos Theory* is *Splinter Cell* at its best. Sneaking through hallways with Sam's varied movement speeds against AI really makes stealth feel like a skill. Make liberal use of quicksaving and this one is still great.



BONEWORKS

bit.ly/3k4GNM

→ I try not to preach about virtual reality games that few can actually play, but if you have a headset on hand, *Boneworks* should be in your library. It's a physics playground like no other with a story mode that, while somewhat janky, is worth the ride for fun of the combat alone.



Future Publishing Ltd Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA | **Tel:** 01225 442244 | **Email:** letters@pcgamer.com | www.pcgamer.com

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CONTRIBUTORS

Jason Coles, Matt Elliott, Ian Evenden, Sam Greer, Luke Kemp, Catherine Kirkpatrick, Daniella Lucas, Andy McGregor, Jeremy Peel, Tom Sykes, Luke Winkie, Robert Zak

PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATION

Photographer Olly Curtis
Spy Illustrations David Lyttleton

DIGITAL PRODUCTION

Group Production Editor Steve Wright
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